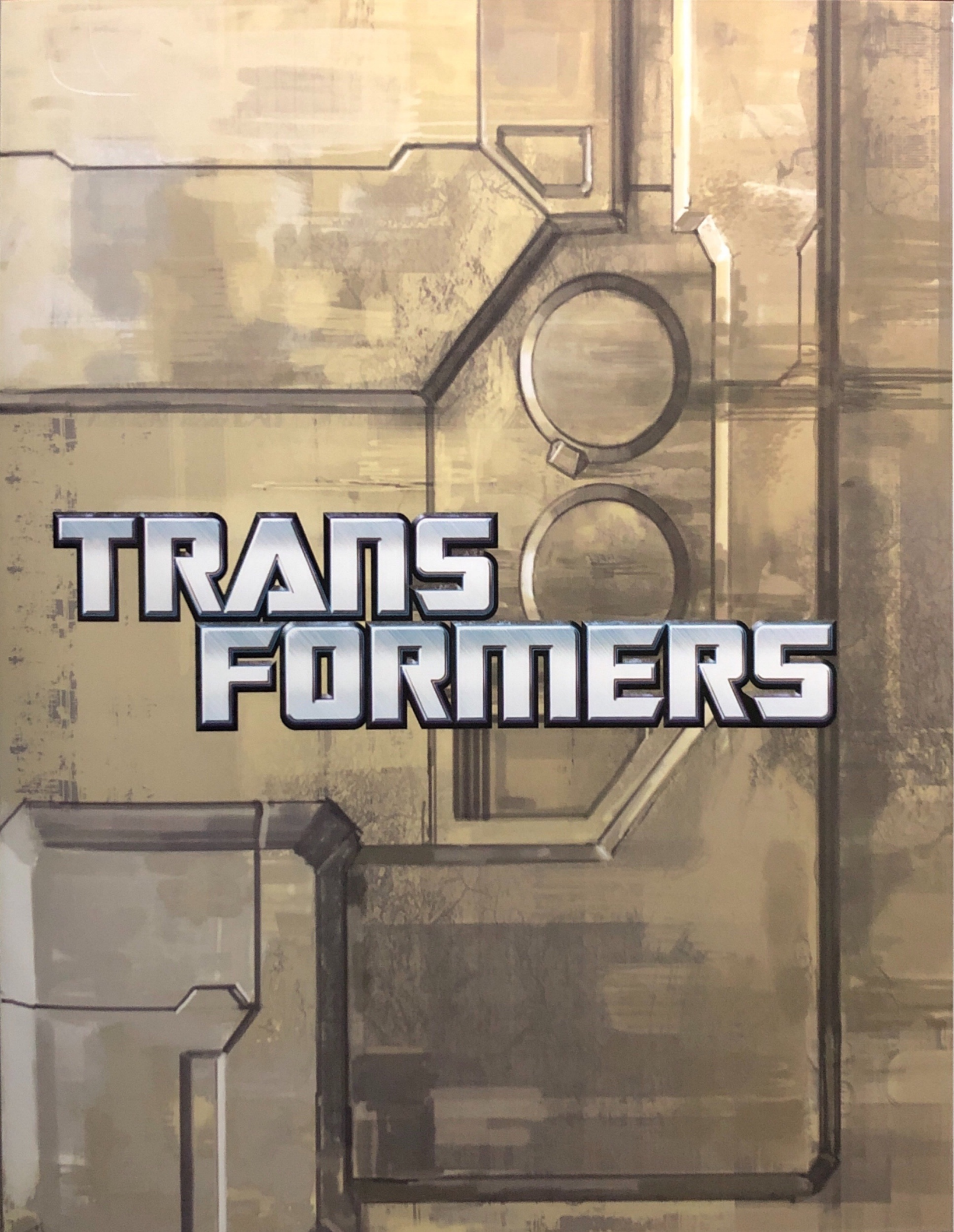
TRANS
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TRANSFORMERS

THE COVENANT OF PRIMUS

JUSTINA ROBSON

47NORTH

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FIRST EDITION

ISBN-10: 1477805990
ISBN-13: 978-1477805992

Printed and bound in China.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

47NORTH

PO Box 400818
Las Vegas, NV 89140

www.amazon.com/47north

Transformers: The Covenant of Primus is produced by becker&mayer!, Bellevue, Washington.
www.beckermayer.com

Designer: Tyler Freidenrich
Editor: Kjersti Egerdahl
Production coordinator: Tom Miller
Product developers: Todd Rider and Peter Schumacher
Managing editor: Michael del Rosario

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FOREWORD

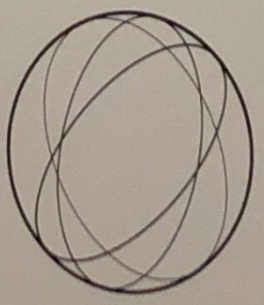
To this day I could not tell you the very beginning of our story—how Primus came to be, nor why, nor when. Though my curiosity burns me greatly, I have had to be satisfied with looking at the Covenant*'s hidden stories, written in codes I cannot decipher, knowing that they exist, and knowing that there was a beginning.*

Yes, there is a first page and prior to that there is a blank page, but that is all.

Today I have set myself the task of translating and editing the Covenant of Primus *so that it is meaningful for human contemplation. Since our fates are now entwined as galactic neighbors, you should have the opportunity to gain a greater understanding of who we are and where we have come from. The* Covenant *is our history—a full and lengthy record—of which this is only a fragment, but I hope that it proves a worthwhile and illustrative fragment that will satisfy your curiosity and allow you to develop a richer understanding of the personalities you have so lately met.*

For the ease of your reading pleasure, I have translated many Cybertronian proper nouns, pronouns, and phrases into English, and into Earth-normative concepts also. In doing this, I hope that I have not caused confusion or overstepped my authority in the use of your languages and customs. It has long been our habit to observe alien cultures and attempt to make ourselves intelligible to them in their own terms wherever we can, be it in physical form, language, or manner. Where a significant deviation from Cybertronian culture cannot be avoided, I shall make a note in the text.

— Alpha Trion



THE THIRTEEN PRIMES

I am.

No moment but the present lies within me. I am as empty as the spaces between the stars. They are the first thing I see, the first thing I know.

In the next quantum of time that passes, I am aware of what and who I am. I know the stars are *above* me and the solid metal body of the planet is *beneath* my feet. This world that supports me is the titanic, semi-hibernating Primus, the demigod who created me. I have a name. I am Alpha Trion, third of the thirteen Primes.

A split cycle later Solus appears to my left out of thin air. There is a flash as she takes form and the ground quakes. Lightning surrounds her in a nimbus that reaches out and crackles into my nerves. I marvel that I can be blinded and shocked, and that I can recover from this. Everything is new. Everything is a wonder, even pain and fright.

Then, with a series of resounding booms, the next nine are made one after another to complete our lineup. Shrouded in the glowing golden light of the Energon burst that accompanies his explosive creation, *Thirteen*'s first gesture is to salute with his arm raised—a sign of victory and greeting marks the mighty effort of imagination and will that has made us all. He is the last Prime, and he completes us. I raise my arm too. To my right and left all do the same. Our first action is unified. Knowledge of our destiny unspools in our minds in a steady cascade as Energon fills our bodies with life and power. Primus's work is done. In concert we will do what he could not; we are his successors, and in our creation he has drawn this phase of his life to a close.

I turn to him automatically across the comms net, son to father, but even as I do so, his presence is already fading away. He switches down from conscious flow to hypersleep with a gentle glide of unraveling synaptic processes. The last we know of him is a feeling of quiet faith, which he has for each of us. He has given us everything of himself, and there is nothing more to say.

I feel bereft: to gain and lose so much in a single minute. Between joy and grief I am torn into silence. Beside me the other Primes stand, titans astride a reclining god, filled with awe. We look at one another. We look at the world, the vast skies, the sprays of light that are stars and galaxies and the near-infinite reaches of the universe that extend beyond our ability to see, or hear, or know. As far as we can tell, there is nothing here but us and our dormant world.

But if there were truly nothing, there would be no need for our existence, and that thrilling and disturbing knowledge is reflected in all our eyes as we turn to face one another. Then, as our awareness unifies, our spirits draw together. We are granted a fleeting glimpse of what has gone before as the past unfurls before our minds' eye.

Ages ago, before time had measure, there was a single being. It had no use for identity or name—it lived, and this was enough for a while. But as it explored the galaxy and began to find other living beings, the bliss of discovery gave way to disturbing thoughts that had no answers: if they are this, and they are many, what am I,

and why am I alone? Having nobody else to talk to, it began a conversation with itself and gradually evolved two distinctive voices with which it examined the different sides of matters. One was reassuring, full of faith and acceptance; the other was restless and relentless, comparing itself with what it found and discovering that there were flaws and needs that went unanswered in the vast emptiness of space.

The two voices took names to themselves: one was Primus, meaning first and one, and the other named himself Unicron, meaning unique and one. They both knew that they were one being, but this act separated them into two pieces whose feelings and insights could not be reconciled. They were the essence of opposition, and, being young and without guidance, they began to fight, each thinking his way was correct and that the other was a fool. The more that they argued, the more they felt in danger from each other's existence.

The division of mind and spirit caused a separation in form so that ultimately they divided physically, as well as in every other way. In spite and disappointment, Unicron became rapacious and destructive, and Primus grew withdrawn and resentful. For a long time they could not truly part and traveled together, Unicron rampaging and Primus attempting to prevent him and make reparation. Primus made overtures to reconcile, but Unicron had found a sense of self that was enlarged by his contempt for others. He would not surrender it to return to the fundamental uncertainty from which he'd arisen. His refusal filled Primus with righteous rage, and so began billions of stellar cycles of struggle between them. Even their bodies altered, in accordance with the reality each of them had created within his mind.

Now Unicron roved the galaxy on a binge of destruction, bent on the erasure of all life in the belief that this would give him peace. Primus grew in the conviction that it was his duty to stop Unicron's devastation and to preserve what joy was left for others as long as it could be made to last—for both of them understood that one day even they would cease to exist. Primus taunted Unicron that all he must do is sit and wait for entropy to do his work for him—the universe would die in heat and chaos regardless of his actions. Unicron replied in kind that Primus should assist him to prevent the creation of more living beings into a world of suffering and disappointment. They were still irrevocably locked together, in spite of all they had done to separate. Being evenly matched, neither could best the other for long. Primus realized that unless something changed, neither would ever prevail.

Therefore, he decided to withdraw from the conflict, and from his role in it.

We return to the present moment and our new selves. Though we may not see Unicron yet, we can feel his presence. He scrapes the edges of our collective awareness with his claws. He is the eye of a storm that crushes planets, assimilates suns. Each ingestion increases his power. Between bouts of fury he pauses, sated for a moment into remembering his rival self. The dread radiation of his stare searches for Primus. But Primus sleeps the sleep of the dead, and the stare washes across us in a blast of dark particles, missing us, as Primus intended. Unicron is so used to seeing the brilliance and focus that was our ancestor that he doesn't see any of us at all. He does not imagine that Primus would simply vanish.

We do not have long before he thinks to come looking.

These are my first records, as Memory of the Primes. I will record everything, even the inglorious matters. To help me, I have been given two objects of immense power—the *Covenant* and the Quill. The *Covenant* takes the form of a book at this moment in time, although it could take many forms. The *Covenant* is an object, like the Quill, whose form is contingent upon its function at any given point in spacetime. Linked quantum pairs join its physical analog—in this case a book—with its pure informational state stored at the universe's holographic rim, always present but completely out of reach.

The first entry in the *Covenant* was not, as I had hoped, the story of Primus's origin and his maker or his place of construction. There was indeed text before our point in time—a great deal of it—but it was in a cipher I could not and never have been able to decrypt. Therein lay the facts, written clearly, perhaps to indicate that there was a reason and a completion to matters, whether or not it was comprehensible.

The *Covenant* continued, suddenly switching into legible Cybertronian:

". . . and so the Thirteen Primes were created. Each one was different and given unique abilities, gifts, and flaws, which allowed a far greater set of potentials than any one being was capable of embodying alone. Primus knew that this was his best chance to defeat Unicron, since the enemies had fought one another to a standstill times without number. They were composed of forces that were in true opposition, like the polarities of a magnet, and every action they took was met by an equal and opposite reaction. In order to change the outcome of their struggle, it was necessary to change the nature of the fight. So Primus altered the only variable that was in his power to change: himself.

He removed himself from the field of battle. In his place he created the Primes and gave to each one of them an equal portion of his power, but he did not make them in his image, as tiny copies who would face the same impossible task. Each Prime was crafted to express not only those driving principles that animated Primus, but also elements that were akin to Unicron. He gave us the ability to choose freely between all the binary opposites so that we need not be trapped as he had been—but would always be able to change in any moment and so escape into more and more new possibilities. And that power would be multiplied thirteenfold."

In mathematical terms alone, this was a shift from certainty, moving from the state of oneness to very high unpredictability—13 to the power of 13—a vast number of opportunities.

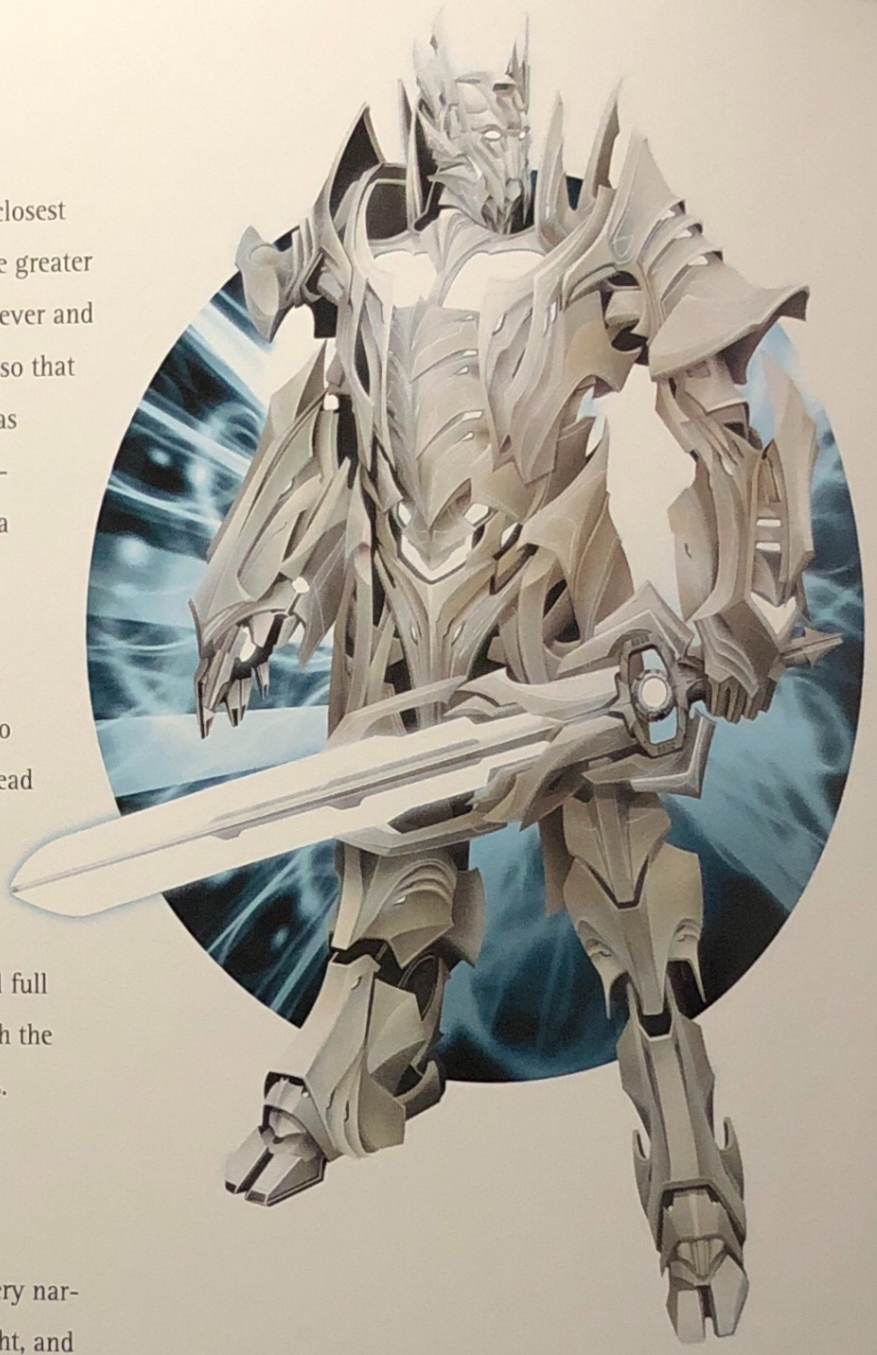
To say that we were all a collection of traits and artefacts would be to render us no more than vehicles or objects. Yes, we were made in a calculated way, but from each combination our personalities naturally emerged as the fused sum of that and surpassed it in every case. And as soon as we began to interact, we began, subtly, to change one another.

My second act as Memory was to ask the others to make their marks in the definitive history of our universe: this book, the *Covenant of Primus*. I give below the truth of who they were, at the beginning, in the order in which they were made, before anything happened that could change us from the purity of Primus's intent. Let it be the first record, so that later we will remember ourselves in our innocence, for we were all innocent.

PRIMA

Prima was the archetypal hero, a warrior made closest to Primus's own type and intents, focused on the greater good. Such people can be dull, but Prima was clever and unselfish with a strong sense of self-awareness, so that even as he remained true to his principles, he was always able to stay one step away from pomposity. He cared for us all like the eldest brother of a large and unruly family, taking too much upon his shoulders perhaps. As Primus did, he was convinced he was both right and *in* the right all the time, which made him a frustrating person to deal with on occasion, but stood him in good stead when it came to a fight.

His weapon was the Star Saber, a sword of an item type like the Quill, whose form was symbolic of its power rather than the actual full limit of it. Its edge could cut between atoms with the accuracy of the finest tool, or sunder mountains.



VECTOR PRIME

Vector was a serious, stoic personality with a very narrow view of correctness: Primus was always right, and by extension, as a creation of Primus, Vector himself could not be in the wrong. Like Prima he was close to the maker. His sense of balance and order was unsurpassed, and just as well, for his power lay in the manipulation of time and space. He was able to create and to prevent paradoxes as it suited him, to distort or to mend the fabric of our physical reality.

He carried many weapons in battle, including a sword and a staff, but his personal artefact of power was the Blades of Time. This, in spite of its name, was not a weapon but a mandala made up of many separate pieces, which could fit together in a nearly infinite variety of ways. Depending on the pattern formed, it granted him access to hidden dimensions through which he could move at will and in which he performed his intricate weavings and unravelings.

Above: Prima, the first made

ALPHA TRION

I, Alpha Trion, was made to be the historian of the Primes and the memory of Primus, in case Primus was ever recalled to life. It was my nature to be detached, although I don't believe I was uncaring. I took a philosophical attitude, an analytic appreciation of others and their deeds.

I was gifted with two artefacts: the *Covenant*, which truly came from and belonged to Primus himself, and in which much was written by Primus's will, and the Quill, with which I wrote my own observations. Unlike all other Primes and subsequent beings of the same lineage, I was given total recall and a direct link to the Spark of Primus, through which I was sustained and inspired during times when the accumulated knowledge and awareness of events would have been otherwise intolerable.

Above: Alpha Trion, the voice of memory

SOLUS PRIME

The creator. Solus was a calm and confident person who was beloved by all the other Primes both for her positive and intelligent support as a friend and also for her ability to create instruments and objects of any kind—something she would readily do for any Prime who asked her. However, she had a fierce temper and was easily angered by anything that smacked of injustice, as Prima and Vector before her.

Her personal artefact was the Forge, a hammer in appearance. She used this together with the Creation Lathe—a holographic projection that her body created in three dimensions around her whenever she was working. It was an intuitive and sensory ability that manifested visually this way to help her design the specific architecture and engineering components of the objects she was working on. On its own, the Forge was a poor instrument, able to create, to mend, to smash to oblivion whatever it touched. Rather, it was the Lathe, and Solus herself, who supplied the vision and the labor behind its actions. When Solus created an entire armor set with a single swing of the mighty device, there were stellar cycles of thought refined and tempered to absolute precision in its arc and anvil-strike.

I note at this point for those of you who may be curious: the Primes, and later the Transformers, do not have gender in the same way that humans and certain other biological species do. Here Solus Prime, and those who were later formed in her lineage, are referred to as "she" in order to comply with your

Right: Solus Prime, the creator

human gender reference terms and to show a distinction that Cybertronians recognize among themselves (though other races do not).

To Cybertronians, there are two distinctive "kinds" that we easily divide ourselves into, recognizing key feature differences in the manner in which information is processed. It is widely supposed among the remaining Primes that this difference was necessary for Solus herself to operate the Creation Lathe, which required a vast capacity for wide-ranging and parallel thought processing.

After becoming part of a wider galactic community, we adopted the habit of using a gender reference protocol when interacting with gendered alien species in order to demonstrate that we are not unfamiliar with the notions of difference and equality; we recognize our difference; we celebrate our equality.

In early, pre-contact Cybertronian notation, however, all Primes and others are referred to by a single symbol. I note that in human terms there is a rough 1:1 ratio of male to female that does not correspond to our 1:12 distinction, and I apologize to any females of the species who may feel slighted at having had their pronoun applied to the less-numerous type of Cybertronian.

MICRONUS PRIME

Micronus was tiny in comparison to the rest: fast, volatile, and containing more energy packed inside him than four of the others put together. What he lacked in scale, he more than made up for with his mind, always coming up with a sensible suggestion or clever plan. He was a watchful observer too, so he often knew what was going on with the others even before they did. Primus intended him to be the conscience of the rest, and he took his role seriously. His innocent nature made him an immediate friend of Solus and those like her, though the early Primes were too somber for his taste.

At war he had an amazing ability to connect with other Primes and boost their power output for incredible feats of strength or endurance. With his allegiance, they were never outgunned.

He had his own artefact too—the Chimera Stone. This enabled him to connect with the other Primes and to direct his energy in the form that suited them. He was also able to mimic their abilities for a while after the Chimera Stone had bonded him to them.

ALCHEMIST PRIME

Alchemist was one of the more mystical Primes, an elemental being who perceived the world in terms of its basic forms—spiritual or material—and who was attuned to its cycles. He was much more intuitive than intellectual, although he lacked no intelligence. As with all the rest, he was capable of handling himself in a fight, but he preferred to immerse himself in the natural world to better understand the mechanisms of change. In his ability to transmute metals and temporarily alter the properties of objects, he seemed more akin to a magician than a battlemaster. He had a gentle spirit that led him to be sympathetic to all the rest. Still waters run deep, as the humans say. I was his closest friend, our joint scholarly approaches providing us with endless debate.

His ability to always see another side to any story was aided by his artefact, the Lenses. As these were part of his optics and integral to his being, they were not something anyone else could ever hope to use.

NEXUS PRIME

Like Alchemist and the others of the middle strata, where Primus and Unicron's energies were most balanced, Nexus had an elemental quality, but in him it was as if elements circulated constantly in an exciting mixture, broaching chaos but never tipping into it, with Nexus riding the edge of the wave front, a daredevil free spirit. This mercurial elusiveness was reflected in his face, which changed constantly, not only in reaction to his feelings but apparently just because moving form was something it had to do.

Although later legend would say that Nexus was chopped into bits, the fact is he was the first Combiner. Made as a single being, he could readily drop into five separate parts, each with its own body and personality. Even after spending cycles apart on different projects, these bots would reunite happily and become Nexus once again without any loss or struggle. He was their sum, and they were joyously fragments, all sufficient unto themselves. Change and recombination were his nature, although he was at heart loyal to Primus and had no time for the deeper darknesses of some of his other brethren.

His artefact was the Enigma of Combination. It is not possible to say what it looked like, as it could look like anything: weapon, jewel, body part . . . and its power was already manifest in all that he did.

Right: Nexus Prime, the first Combiner

ONYX PRIME

Where Alchemist was most in tune with nature in the form of elements, Onyx was more like a "beast." He was capable of traveling in spirit across time or space, thanks to his artefact, the Triptych Mask.

The three faces of the mask allowed him to freely access his own subconscious and the roots of living awareness in all creatures; he shared vision with beings he could never meet, across distances he could never travel, gaining knowledge from other ways of being so alien that the rest of us would not even recognize them. This ability made him seem powerful and a little frightening at times, and his alpha nature made him play this up.

The first mask, at the top of the totems, was named Farsight. This opened visions into other places and times, many real, some unreal—he knew the difference, but nobody else who tried to see through it could tell what was truth and what was some distant creature's dream.

The second mask, in the center of the column, was Predator. This gave him immediate insight into any creature, so that he could hunt it faultlessly.

The third mask was the strange undead face of Mournsong—it was alive and vigorous on the back, but cold and empty on the front—and gave visions that only Onyx was able to comprehend. He reported faithfully, watching me write it down, that "Mournsong shows the journey of a Spark across the hidden regions of death."

Onyx was the only Prime so powerfully attuned to spirit. Some considered him illogical and fanciful, but there was a burning, friendly loyalty about Onyx that simply made him good to be around. He was inspiring, and for that he was unique in being the friend of all Primes.

Above: Onyx Prime, the spirit warrior

AMALGAMOUS PRIME

Amalgamous was the joker of the pack, though never cruelly so. His gentle fun-poking was great light relief even as it pushed at the comfort zones of the others—the more serious sometimes taking it badly. His artefact was a Scythe, although you would hardly know it as, like the rest of his body, it was in constant flux, transforming from one shape to another, one state to another, liquid to solid and back again. Bright and cheeky, Amalgamous was never still and, given half a chance, would be tinkering with anything to figure out how it worked, what it would do.

He lacked the seriousness and focus of a true fighter, although his unpredictability was an asset sometimes. He was not the most forward-thinking or bright of the sparks among the Primes, but he was gentle at heart. The archetypal shifter, he never lingered where he wasn't welcome but simply moved on, not taking anything personally, not holding grudges or remembering deeds. His memory slipped as easily as his shape, although it had an odd way of suddenly sharpening when something important happened.

His artefact was the Transformation Cog, from which all later T-Cogs would be modeled.

QUINTUS PRIME

Quintus was an innocent daydreamer, with a strong tendency toward perfectionism and idealism. He constantly sought expression of his ideas and was driven to prove his theories correct by experimental invention. In this he was often stymied by the less imaginative Primes who had no time for his speculations, but he had a mind second to none and was unwilling to let it lie fallow just for the sake of peace and quiet. He believed overwhelmingly that life was the most important, sacred thing, to be encouraged to flourish at all costs and in all varieties to enrich the universe.

His unique power was embodied in the Emberstone, an object akin to Primus's Spark, which was able to seed the explosion of living processes in base elements.

Right: Quintus Prime, the experimental dreamer

LIEGE MAXIMO

Maximo was the talker, the manipulative one who could bend words and thoughts much more easily than metal. His silvered tongue was capable of the most eloquent charm, and he soon learned how to pitch whatever line he was selling to the person in question, tailoring his language and methods to exactly match their desires or to feed their suspicions. He was often watchful and quiet, absorbing, calculating. He had a knack for instantly understanding where the nuts and bolts of a person were hidden, where their secret switches lay. He was made to triumph with schemes where outright conflict failed or to avoid conflict by maneuvering in advance. His diplomacy was favored by a general likeable quality that made his sympathy feel very genuine—and I believe that it was. He threw himself wholeheartedly into any role he thought would work, becoming instantly convincing to himself.

The power these skills gave him over others, most of whom were naive at this point, was incalculably immense. The other Primes were not ready for someone as many-faced as he could be. He realized this with characteristic speed and from the outset began crafting himself a hidden path to power, directly beneath the nose of Prima, who couldn't even imagine such plots.

His artefact was the Liegian Darts. There were actual darts, filled with toxins of all kinds, which he could deploy to disrupt others, but the real darts were his words and his thoughts, their barbs and effects unsurpassed by any mere physical object.

Above: Liege Maximo, the manipulator

MEGATRONUS

A warrior in the mold of Prima, Megatronus was his dark antithesis. He was also the most complex of all the Primes, caught between warring impulses of immense passion that never allowed him peace. His dedication to Primus was unswerving, but faced with Primus's nature on a daily basis, and Prima's emulation of it, he could not help but see himself as an outsider, forever damned by the very powers that gave him such terrifying strength. His ruthlessness, ambition, conviction, and ability to take any course of action gave him near-limitless potential.

At the same time, he felt these qualities earned him the disfavor of the other Primes—he was too like Unicron. They turned their gaze away when his burning visage confronted them. It haunted him. He had done nothing wrong, never did, and yet he felt he was unworthy. The injustice of it scored his spirit. It seemed that he took on the burdens of darkness at his own expense while the rest could feel assured of their rightness, not having to soil their hands with grim compromises. He was too proud to recognize how vulnerable this left him, as he could never admit any weakness. He covered his fears with zealotry. Even with those closest to him—Maximo, Solus, Micronus, and Onyx—he could blow hot or cold depending on how his paranoia fared. He was unstable.

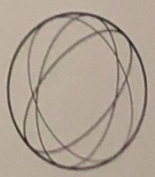
His personal artefact was crafted for him later by Solus Prime at his request and design. The Requiem Blaster was a weapon that drew on the burning core of distant suns—casting beams that were of such an intensely focused plasma that no material could survive their passage.

Opposite: Thirteen, the visionary

THE THIRTEENTH PRIME

Thirteen was unlike the other Primes. His type was warrior, a physical adept, with the leadership and intellectual fortitude of kings. Where Megatronus was riddled with contradiction, Thirteen had no such troubles and was perhaps as a result far lesser in ego than any of the other late Primes. At this time of our making he was quiet and dutiful, obedient to Prima's commands and dedicated to assisting those who required it. He was like Prima's second, but unlike the rest he had no special object or weapon associated with him, taking up only those lesser tools crafted by Solus, and his armor, as he was instructed. This would seem odd if we did not all know that his true purpose was as mediator and visionary.

Thirteen was an inspirational speaker and a deep thinker with a calm soul. His steady, perceptive nature meant he was well liked, and he pulled his weight. He used to comfort others in times of stress with a friendly hand on their shoulder and the words, "All are one." There was a contented light in him that made us believe it. Even Megatronus could be calmed this way when he came in from one of his great battle rages, foaming with his own puissance and resentment. *Thirteen* united us. Without his influence we would have fallen into disarray far sooner.



Here ends the first entry in this Covenant of Primus, *the legacy of all knowledge about Cybertron and the beings that live thereon.*

THE EXPULSION OF UNICRON

Our great task was not something we could simply get up and go to. We didn't know ourselves well enough, and we didn't know our enemy. In that, at least, we had help. Because Unicron was an exact duplicate of Primus in every way except for the frequency of his energy systems, we knew how he was made and what he was able to do. The *Covenant* also released the recorded memories of their past battles to study. So after the day of our making, we rapidly settled down to discovering how our abilities might work, singly and together, and we analyzed the past, looking for clues as to how we could approach him.

It was soon obvious that we divided naturally into three groups. The first were the warriors: Prima, Vector, Megatronus, Onyx, Amalgamous. The second were the strategists: Alpha Trion, Quintus, Liege Maximo, and Micronus. The last were the free agents: Alchemist, Solus, Nexus, and *Thirteen*. They were capable of battle but also had other qualities that made them suited to more subtle forms of warfare than direct assault. We harbored no illusions that there would be more than one aspect to the war. Our greatest ally was surprise. If we failed at the first attempt, it was likely Unicron would more than match us at any second meeting once he had a chance to contemplate our existence.

After our initial tests were over, we had Solus construct a virtual copy of Unicron. When we were not engaged in the gathering of materials or the practicing of various arts, we assembled at the holo-suite she had built for us to study him and attempted various plots against him, as a game. We tested everything to exhaustion. In our quiet periods of rest we talked over the nature of the problem, and as our understanding grew, one thing over all became clear: we could not kill Unicron. He was orders of magnitude in excess of us, for one thing. We felt doubtful that anything would be his undoing, short of burying him in the heart of a star to be fusioned out of existence. And that task was beyond us.

Quintus fancifully suggested that since entropy was his thing anyway, the trick would be to increase his order, not try to destroy him, but we had no clue how that would be done or if it made sense. Quintus, Alchemist, and Onyx did have a very strong and believable conviction, however, that even if we were capable of ending Unicron, that would probably also be the end of Primus and, by extension, all of us. To extinguish such a massive element of it, however repellent we might find it, would be to kill us all.

In the past we knew that Primus had attempted to reabsorb Unicron but had failed—Unicron was having none of it—so this avenue was also closed to us. The best we could hope for would be to force Unicron into the same hibernating state as Primus had willingly taken on himself. This way, although he could continue to survive, he would at least not be taking any active roles. Better

Opposite: Unicron, the chaos bringer

too that this were done before he spawned his own set of independent Dark Primes, although Micronus judged him too egotistical for that—"What, and give his power away to lesser mortals? I don't think so!" Megatronus, knowing Unicron's tendencies best, agreed. Prima pulled a face, and then the two of them began to argue, back and forth, until the rest of us drifted away.

Megatronus was a difficult person to be around, tormented deep down, knowing that he represented in large part what we mostly held to be anathema. He particularly loathed Prima, as if Prima had stolen his rightful place. But he had his friends, Onyx, Maximo, and Alchemist. They kept him in balance, and though he expected rejection for the more savage of his ideas, he didn't find much of that. Solus smiled on him and made him the first set of Dark Energon skins—armor we would wear for the conflict to protect us from the corrupting energies of Unicron's aura. She also agreed, after much discussion and doubtful considerations, to craft him a special weapon, the Requiem Blaster, a gun that drew on the hearts of distant stars to power its plasma beam. Nothing could stand against it. She felt that it was necessary at last for our fight against Unicron, but its overweening power seemed to take it into a dimension beyond the rest of us. With it in his hand, Megatronus could threaten us all, if he wished to. She didn't say this in so many words; it was Maximo who said it aloud, in his honest but unnerving way of coming out with an uncomfortable truth.

"So," Megatronus sneered, hurt pride cutting him as deep as the blaster would have, "You don't trust me enough to let me have it? Is that it?"

Solus stood her ground, considering, and she held his gaze. They looked into each other's eyes for many silent minutes, taking measures none of us could fathom. Finally she nodded slowly. "I do trust you," she said. "It is the weapon itself that I do not trust. All weapons have only one purpose—to kill and to harm. This weapon is so great in its presence, so pure in intent, that I fear for your safety, Megatronus. Such things exert a force all their own upon the minds of those who carry them. But of all of us, perhaps you are the greatest warrior, because you fight all the time within yourself, and you have stood against your demons. I will make the gun as you requested it. I trust you to remain its master. I would not have you fall to the tyranny of its promises."

Megatronus was proud of that speech she made, which showed her care and her esteem of him. He was so happy and grateful to be recognized thus. He loved her for it with absolute loyalty and unswerving admiration. Being allowed to feel so special publicly brought out his sweet side too, which was charming. It also made Maximo terrifically jealous, though he tried to hide it under a lot of rationalizing. That didn't fool Megatronus; it simply pleased him further—that he had outdone Maximo, had outdone even Prima, and was worth envying. I think that was the seed of our destruction right there, but most of us were so busy that we didn't pay much attention to it. Such personal things had to be put aside in the service of the task.

As the warriors practiced the use of their weapons, they also requested the manufacture of many others. Most of these were intended to be disposable. Like our shields and armoring, they were made to counter certain abilities we had seen Unicron employ in the past—to destabilize particular alloys, to disrupt energy beams, to nullify frequency fields, and so forth. Some, however,

needed to be more powerful. Among these was the Cyber Caliber, a two-handed sword made lovingly for Nexus to wield, either in one piece or in five separate sections as short swords. These latter pieces were odd blades—carvers and slicers that doubled as other tools for the healing or dismantling of Cybertronian organisms.

The Forge of Solus Prime rang day and night to build these things. She was tireless, and when not actively working she spent long downtime cycles deep in conversation with Nexus and Amalgamous, or Onyx, trying to ferret out their skills to see if she could make things that possessed some of their powers. Micronus became a good friend to them, to Solus in particular. He could often be seen riding on the top of her head or on one of her shoulders as she worked. He would augment her hammer strikes when she asked him, and so much of our gear was made stronger.

Although that aspect of our work went well, it took much longer than we thought to craft a battle plan that had a chance of success. We became experts at tag-team play as we figured out how to allow the warriors of the squad to survive Unicron's initial assaults—leaping in and out of battle as the scoreboard figures that detailed our health losses and gains in each encounter plunged up and down in sickly sine waves before flat-lining. Only Vector proved an expert in maneuvers, but then he was the only one capable of teleporting himself into the far reaches of the solar system we inhabited and playing dodge

Left: Vector Prime, the interdimensional traveler

and duck with the asteroids in the swirling belt of rocks beyond our fifth planet.

Most of the time we were wiped in under ten cycles. We didn't require any great analyst to tell us that this wasn't going to be long enough to plug a jack into him, let alone ferret through his insides to a point where we could access his neural net. In fact, his schematic was so complex and his mind so devious that Solus, Quintus, Micronus, and I had to halt simulations in order to build a computer capable of running all of his possible responses at a speed that was realistic. Thus we crafted the first version of what would later become Vector Sigma and set it up to parallel process every option in random sequences, just so we could witness the true horror of what Unicron might be like on a good day.

As it turned out, on a good day he could own all of us in two and a half cycles. His combination of degrading aura, multiple stuns, shocks, disruption waves, and physical assaults required micro-precision timing just to endure, let alone get in any shots of our own. After a particularly long day, Prima flung down the Star Saber in exasperation on the holo-plate and roared, "Does this thing have no weak points? It cannot be this difficult!"

Megatronus looked up at him from his defeated position on his back a few metrons off. "Don't get your circuits in a twist, old man. We'll get him. Just needs a little . . . finesse."

Liege Maximo, who had been watching from the sidelines, agreed. "It's very unlikely he will hit you at his optimal sequence since he has no idea who any of you are or what you're doing."

"But if he does, we're gonna be junked without hitting a blow," Amalgamous said, thoughtful, his redlined readouts visible across his chest as he shifted around restlessly, making and unmaking bolt-cutters out of his feet.

"Actually," Maximo said, "I think we need to create some combination moves of our own, not just stand around hacking in whatever way we can." And he went on to sketch out some clever ideas that he had to explain a few times, because of the complexity. "You can practice these sets of moves, then have a code word for each one, and whoever is first to see his reactions can call the shots. And we save the big moves for the end, because once he sees them, he'll have the idea to use them too. Whatever we can do, he can do, if he figures it out." He glanced up, pointedly. "That means you keep your plans hidden, Vector especially. No space-time finagling until the opportune moment."

Vector frowned but nodded, seeing the logic. Onyx helped him up from where he had been flung by the machine's very gentle simulation of Unicron's repulsion bolt. "Be long night," Onyx said. "Study hard, remember order." He shook his heavy, quilled head. Mental tasks were hard for him—he much preferred to rely on his own instincts rather than any plan.

I copied out Maximo's plans carefully for the records and saw that they were distributed for later study. Then I withdrew from that day's practice, weary and trying not to be despondent. Only *Thirteen* seemed unbowed. He was never downcast, no matter what obstacles seemed to have been put in his way. He accepted reality for what it was, and he worked on it thoughtfully if he could; if not, he let it alone and found a more productive way of helping out. Now he smiled, as if someone had given him Unicron's personal shutdown sequence. "Maximo has good ideas,"

he said, studying the handouts. "He is very clever. I think he is really onto something."

"Maybe Unicron isn't that clever," I said, not hoping for it too much. Maybe a little.

"He has spent a long time on his own without anyone to worry him," *Thirteen* said. "He will not be at his best. And he is used to fighting Primus, not a crew of smaller and shiftier opponents. We will make it. Nexus and Alchemist think they know how to initiate cerebral shutdown, same as Primus did for himself, but whether Unicron likes it or not. Come and see." His enthusiasm was dauntless.

We walked across to a second simulation suite, set up like a strange skeleton, radiating its lights into the Cybertronian night as it built up images of Unicron's internal works. Many sites within him were illuminated, and once we had greeted one another, Nexus explained that these were all locations where many of his primary system functions could be disabled, even if only briefly, by the use of explosives, toxins, or jamming circuits.

"The Free Agent team will have the job of attempting to simultaneously assault these nodes," he said carefully, labeling each one with the name of an agent. "None of them will be that effective alone, but together they will stun him for a short while."

"Some of those are far below the surface," *Thirteen* said, poking about in the schematic with interest. "How will they get there?"

"We have an idea about that." Nexus smiled. "But it's a secret for now until we test it out. The important part is

Right: Alchemist Prime, the elemental

that one of us will have to do the actual shutdown. The rest, outside or inside, are merely decoys."

Solus looked on, thinking. "I should stay outside, I think. I can fix and repair the warriors there."

"We need you on the inside," Alchemist said, pointing. "We need you to use the Forge to cripple him whenever he tries to change his tactics, and keep doing it. The others will just have to look after themselves." He paused, and we all glanced at one another. Nobody had said anything about anyone coming back. I realized that this wasn't something factored into any of the plans so far.

"So, if we fail . . ."

"If we fail, then . . ." Nexus shrugged.

"Right. So, how do we win?" *Thirteen* asked, discarding failure without a second thought. "Who is this icon meant to be?" He pointed at a little mote next to Unicron's Spark chamber.

"That's you," Alchemist said rather proudly, as if unveiling a master plan.

"I thought *Thirteen* was meant to stay out of the line of fire," I said, feeling sure this was Primus's intention. If there was a later, he would be essential.

"Well, he is and he isn't," Alchemist continued. "He's not in *actual* danger there, unless you count being that close to so much Dark Energon condensed. That's the point. The Spark in *Thirteen* here is nearly identical to that of Primus himself. Its Energon frequency is the exact opposite waveform of Unicron's Spark. We believe that by placing them so close together they will neutralize each other. When that happens, Unicron's body will automatically close around his Spark chamber and move him into a hibernation mode at what it perceives as a lethal assault that has no obvious countermove. It would normally then wait until the threat can be verified gone before waking him. However, we're going to lock that part of Unicron into an infinite loop so that it can't perceive the passage of time." He looked up and across—"Maximo and Vector will manage that together."

"Yeah . . . what happens to *Thirteen* then, if Unicron shuts down—won't his Spark be turned out?" Solus peered at the larger forms of Alchemist and Nexus. She was ready to be angry at the idea of sacrificing someone. At her side, *Thirteen* frowned in concentration, imagining his role.

"Well, yes it will," Alchemist said rather awkwardly, "but it will survive because Unicron will shield his Spark instantly. Then all we need to do is retrieve *Thirteen* and we can restart him. He'll be down and out, but he won't be dead. And with Unicron in hibernation there'll be no issue with the rescue. At that point we can just walk out."

"Theoretically," said Quintus, looking up from his calculations. He meant to be comforting, I think. He found it comforting at any rate. He had great faith in facts and figures. "And I can probably jolt him out of it," he said, indicating the small amulet-sized bag that he wore around his neck and patted the Emberstone inside it.

Thirteen nodded steadily. "All right. Sounds plausible." If he was fazed at the idea of killing himself briefly, he didn't look it. He saw the sense of the plan: he approved of it. The chance of it being his last act seemed almost not to cross his mind, although I am sure it must have.

"Sounds suicidal," Maximo said, coming up to us. "I like it! Brave, daring, and just slightly tinged with insanity. What could possibly go wrong?"

"Shu' it, gobby," Onyx said behind him, poking him in the side with a claw in a friendly but reproving way. Maximo did shut it, but he looked satisfied.

Once that had been settled, all we had to do was practice and make a few contingency plans. We constructed an energy matrix, with the assistance of our new computer, Sigma, which would be stored within the body of Primus. It would be a primary memory core into which all of our experiences as living beings would be copied faithfully, in case we did not return from the battle. Whoever would lead us after our duty was done would be able to draw upon it at any time, whether the Thirteen were present or not. *(Later, this energy matrix came to be known as the Matrix of Leadership, although the Thirteen did not give it this name.)*

As soon as he was satisfied that we could only make variations and no improvements, Prima gathered us together. Twilight was falling over the long, plated plains of Primus's flank, the last slow golden lines of sunset trailing the gantries and spires of the practice arrays. "Assemble your weapons, ready yourselves," he said. "It is time."

Within a few cycles we had gathered, fully loaded and eager for battle. "We will assume that our appearance will be a surprise. Solus and the Free Agents, take your point position. Warriors, with me. Saboteurs, you will wait the full count before entering the portal *regardless* of whatever you see and hear. Do you understand?" As one we solemnly nodded, whatever personal issues we had developed over the cycles forgotten now—we had only our targets in mind, our survival. It was a good feeling, a great feeling, this brotherhood. "Vector," Prima said, turning to that Prime who stood apart on the rise of the Heights, staring into the night sky. "Do you have a coordinate lock?"

"Yes."

"Then open the gate when you are ready."

Onyx growled softly, unable to help himself, but otherwise we all stayed silent. There could be no warnings. Vector waited until Onyx had stopped rumbling and then, with a twist of his mandala, a huge arch of space opened up on the plain before us, shimmering like a curtain of light through which we could dimly glimpse strange constellations. Then we caught our first sight of the enemy—a vast monster clawed around a small moon in the throes of some indescribable feasting. He was an obscene industrial nightmare, smoke oozing from his stacks, raw energies radiating their excess out of him in bursts and pulses of light, belches of gases briefly flaring into fires or spitting out of his joints in sprays of obscene wastage. The moon's remains glowed under him, as he ripped it apart, releasing all the pent energy that had held it intact. He broke off a sizable chunk and flung it away, searching for something closer to the core, though what I could not imagine—some mineral or element he wanted.

A shiver ran through us all, exultant, terrified, determined. I have not felt so alive before or since that moment. I can feel it as if it happened only a cycle ago. And then Solus raised her sword and the Forge, one in each hand, and with the sword gestured a strike, firmly, forward . . . and she began to run toward the Portal.

INTO THE DARK

The Free Agents flowed with her, hot on her heels, their formation exacting, *Thirteen* bringing up their rear, unrecognizable in his armor and under the weight of all the gear he was carrying, though he bore it lightly. The Warriors flanked them in their own pattern so that they

entered just behind the first pack and vanished across the gulf of space that only Vector could understand.

We Saboteurs all silently began our count, fixated on the vague sights that shimmered back and forth in such frustrating incompleteness through the gate. We saw the Beast turn, the first sign of combat . . .

Micronus clung to Quintus's shoulder, nearly falling off as he craned forward. With a nod, Vector passed through his creation to take his place with the warriors, and then we were alone.

"We could always just not go," Maximo said, conversationally.

Quintus struck him across the back of the head.

"Or we could totally stick with the plan; I was just *saying.*" Maximo rolled his eyes and rubbed his skull. "Could you hit harder next time? Only I still have a few circuits left functioning here–" but then he was cut short as we all, even he, surged forward into the veil and passed on into the unknown.

Above: The Thirteen go to war against Unicron

What happened next was a blur for each one of us and seemed to take only microcycles, though it lasted far longer than that.

We came out into hell.

The first thing that hit us all was the wave-front of Dark Energon emanating from the hulk of Unicron's body–the most obvious and simple of his defenses, but one that no simulation could ever have given a taste of. Even through the armoring and in the knowledge it was coming, nothing could have prepared us for the sheer shattering assault of its alien frequencies screaming instantly inward along every nerve and every channel. The shock was so intense that I felt my conviction falter instantly–oh no, it was not possible to act inside this nightmare! Every part of my being screamed for me to escape immediately for the sake of my life . . . but ahead of me I could already see Megatronus, limned in purple, shooting straight for Unicron's blazing eyes, and the sight hardened my resolve.

Off to a high angle and closer in, we saw Prima swing the Star Saber in a slice that sent purple energy light and

liquid spraying out into space in a huge arc as it struck true into Unicron's shoulder. And then, clutched to the back of Unicron's neck, the winged, savage form of Onyx, all blades and claws and teeth, shredding and tearing huge chunks from the vulnerable armoring between the plates. He paused, flinging a section aside, and screeched through the gaping mouth of Predator, the hunter's mask. His cry rallied the others so they moved faster, dodging the sudden blue and white beam that shot out of Unicron's gaze toward them. Then Unicron reached up and seized Onyx in one colossal fist, trying to tug him out of his body by main force, regardless of damage. Onyx screamed differently then . . . but we couldn't wait to see the outcome—Prima driving forward, Megatronus restabilizing his guns and bearing on target, *Thirteen* flinging his burst grenades right into that annihilating stare . . . because we had to reach Vector's ever-shifting position for him to relay us to our posts.

I couldn't stop my amazement. We had engaged. The first pass was completed, and we were *still alive*.

Vector opened micro portals into Unicron's interior.

Solus went first, with a defiant scream, and vanished before us. We nearly all died then as a stream of black missiles came hurtling silently toward our position—Energon-seekers that we had to scatter to avoid, and then counter with whatever weapons we had. We scrambled for responses, for shielding, suddenly disorganized but with enough missile avoidance practice in our bodies that they worked without thought and deployed our chaff flares and dummy targets in time to reroute three.

Micronus managed to pull one of them off a fumbling Quintus by darting away in a burst of Energon, although it went against the plan. I shot it down with a beam gun, but in doing so winged Vector, seeing him curse me even as I realized what was happening, too late. But he was not badly damaged, and we regrouped to reach the next point in our carefully designed avoidance pattern just in time to fling Maximo through to his position. More missiles came, and another search beam, violent blue where it touched anything. It sliced off half the weapons that Alchemist was carrying in one easy, silent stretch. He cursed, partly in fear, partly regret, as their useless

casings fell away. They floated slowly toward the surface of the eaten moon, and we burned our jets away in panic. Scenes of the fighting elsewhere came to me in brief glimpses as I tore to my coordinates.

Beyond the moon's disintegrating surface, the warriors continued to distract and harry, their jetpacks and rockets blasting them around with fierce bursts of gas that vanished almost instantly into the starving emptiness of the space around us. Onyx floated, broken, leaking Energon from a dozen places, but Prima was near him, defending him. Megatronus and *Thirteen* executed their preprogrammed maneuvers, shouting across the comm, their mouths moving in silence from where I stood as they danced around Unicron's savage assaults. Their reactions and their agility amazed me. Meantime Amalgamous sneaked around for a surprise assault from the back, hiding himself behind debris that Unicron had spat out, darting from spot to spot like a streak of flowing mercury.

Then Unicron roared, and his voice was like a fall of rock. "Do you think you will best me, little robots? I grow tired of your antics! Die and be done!" He paused, and I assumed something had happened internally to him. . . . His gaze searched around, looking, I realized, for us.

"You're up, Alpha," Vector said, as if nothing were happening. His steady voice brought me out of my daze.

"You will not prevail!" Unicron screamed and unleashed from his whole skin surface what I can only

Right: Megatronus, proud and vulnerable

describe as a shock-front, though to this day I don't know what it was made of.

"Now!" Vector pushed me hard. The wave must have hit him just after, but I was gone already, inside the depths of Unicron himself and so protected from whatever it did.

I materialized in a space so cramped it broke my foot immediately. The frequency shift of energy in here was intolerable, making everything a red ocean of agony, although physically that was not the worst. I faced what we had suspected might happen in our darker moments: Unicron's overpowering convictions were part and parcel of his being. He was so much greater than I was, so much more powerful—his will assaulted my own and effortlessly turned it over from positive to negative.

Instantly I lost all my nerve, laughed aloud at the stupidity of our hubris—of course we could not win; Unicron was unstoppable, as powerful as a god. We were merely chattels for him to use or abuse as he saw fit. And moreover, he was right to do it. He and Primus themselves were living examples of the futility and stupidity of mortal suffering and the burdens of conscious thought. Better to end these ravings and thrashings and find peace in the silent eternity of death.

This was the corruption of Unicron. Pretending to have it attack you was one thing. Having it do so, another. Only the millions of repetitions of the drill I had learned kept my hands moving in spite of what my mind was thinking or the despair I was feeling. Doing that took all the resources I had. But in the middle of it I felt my hands start to falter as they found the lines that joined part of his neural net to his left weaponry array. . . . What was the point even of this little gesture of defiance? Then, unexpectedly, I heard *Thirteen*'s voice in my mind, crackly and broken through the comm, but still unmistakable. He did not sound even remotely ruffled. His voice was strong, but above all, it was kind. In a sea of loathing and spite, it stood out like a spear of light, contradicting the perverse self-destructive statements in my mind, soothing my hopelessness with its simple words. "All are one." I understood then that whatever the outcome might be and however it felt, it was for me to act as if I, and not Unicron, were master of the universe. He and I were not separate, and if he could act, I could too. He had become despair itself, longing for chaos and endings while we Primes and our maker were the other side of the same coin—hopeful and looking toward order and resolution. Neither was greater than the other. Both must exist if either existed. I was his equal.

My hands resumed their business . . . flying through it easily. Unicron lost the use of his arm. For a moment, gone almost before it began, I saw beyond the duality of the broken brothers into a place of possibilities that *Thirteen* had so aptly named—everything, *everything* was one. The results of all actions came to everyone, the necessity for all actions came from everywhere.

The world as I saw it reduced itself to easy, simple matters: open this, connect this instrument, check power on, ramp up Energon supply. I accepted Unicron's greater power and his hatred, just as *Thirteen* did. I didn't try to resist it. I let it be, and in turn its grip on me fell loose and then away. . . . I finished my chores, applied the correct voltages, and felt Unicron lurch and stagger as the results flooded his system. I may not have turned the battle, but I had done what I came to do. I moved to my next chore—maintaining the disruption.

In their far distant cubbyholes of agony, the same story played out in Solus, Nexus—all five of him—Alchemist, and Micronus. Far from the imagined games, as far as hell from heaven, we executed our duties with numb spite, and then, one by one, as *Thirteen* spoke to us, instead of sitting and waiting for death, we looked about us for some more useful mischiefs. It was so inglorious and so peaceful. I think that's what made me laugh the most. Unicron could easily have beaten us, and we knew it, but thanks to *Thirteen* we had each won our own fight with him—not this Unicron the lurching monstrosity around us—but the Unicron *inside* us, to whom we had almost given all our power.

Unicron assaulted us with visions. I saw myself melted to slag, my ideas vanished with my processors. The others each had their torment. He mocked us, promising that either our corruption and ending or our lives would both be hells from which there was no exit. He showed us successful, glorious, our visions coming to fruition over a long future—and it was meaningless, pointless—all came to nothing as the universe ceased to exist. It had never mattered. . . . He filled our minds with this in image after image, and he was laughing. We could feel it.

Micronus cackled over the comm, "Long as we're together, hell ain't a bad place to be! Overload this!" For a split second there was a scream of shearing metal and the burning stink of boiling heavy elements that came gusting through the vents, almost choking me on their poison. I smiled even so.

Above: Micronus Prime, the catalyst

Meanwhile not everyone had even made it to their bases. Quintus and Maximo were both off course, having been teleported to the wrong coordinates because Unicron had moved so fast while they were in transit. They were temporarily reduced to some hacking and slashing antics at anything they could lay their hands on, but they persevered. They were the luckier ones.

Outside Unicron's body, the shock wave had nearly finished the others off with one move. Disrupting all functions, it had sent them into seizures. Prima lost the Star Saber in his convulsions, and it went spiraling away from him, far up and out across the moon's dusty surface, falling so slowly it looked like a glinting feather. Only the work of the Saboteurs had prevented Unicron dispatching the warriors immediately—as it was, he jerked and

spasmed, his body made and remade by the ferocious strikes of the Forge and the frenetic madness of his own immune-system scraplets.

By the roaring force of his garbled words, we gathered that Liege Maximo was having a conversation with him—never one to even attempt to restrain himself, Unicron had already lost his temper and was half focused on locating and killing Maximo first, out of sheer hatred for whatever it was that Maximo was saying in that laconic drawl of his. The Beast stood, internally focused, clawing at his own neck, stabbing his massive fingers into the gaps in his bodywork in an effort to crush Maximo, shots of EMP and radioactive poison pouring out of his hand. It must have hurt him.

"It's not *your* fault . . ." we heard through the static, as Maximo spoke in tones of smooth reason, "We don't even want to kill you. Now, have you ever thought about relocating to a different galaxy? There are some very attractive places out there, chock-full of Empty, just perfect for a sensitive being like yourself. I could sell one to you for a very reasonable price. . . ."

Then Megatronus, tumbling out of control, his finger rigid on the Requiem Blaster's trigger, shot Vector through the middle just as he managed to correct his rotation. *Thirteen*, dazed, weapons lost, ended up beside Amalgamous, who, of all the exposed Primes, was the only one not severely affected. His form shifting was so frequent anyway that the shock didn't disrupt much, and he recovered almost instantly. He grabbed *Thirteen* and made himself into a rocket, speeding over to Vector, where they both used their hastily learned medical skills to patch up the smoking hole in Vector's middle. Mercifully, they drifted into Unicron's shadow as the Beast went in pursuit of more visible prey. He set his sights on the helpless Prima, advancing upon him even though he had one hand still stuck at his neck, with purple liquid dripping freely between his fingers.

"Looks like this is our moment. Your chance is now," Amalgamous whispered, taking a hold of *Thirteen* and molding his hands into the calipers of a mighty booster bot. *Thirteen* nodded, and they looked at Vector, who flickered in and out of consciousness. *Thirteen* put his hand down onto Vector's arm. "Just one more," he said. "Then you can rest." Energon and other liquids were beading out of Vector's body; the hole blackened right through him was cauterized, but other organs had suffered too. If he could not make the jump for *Thirteen* then we had no chance, but at the sound of *Thirteen*'s voice his eyes flickered open. His mouth smiled, weakly and he took hold of *Thirteen*'s arm in response, turning his dimmed gaze toward Unicron. The Beast was now crouched over his prize of a stranded Prima, the limp body of Onyx recaptured in his free hand, which was rising, rising, to smite.

Amalgamous ripped a patch cable out of his armor cavity and rammed it into Vector's arm port. "Here, juice up and get this guy into place. The big guy's busy chomping Prima with a side of Onyx."

"Just one down payment of a two-year supply of Energon . . ." Maximo's voice faded in and out, nonstop.

Megatronus, still spinning, still floating, still convulsed on the trigger of the Requiem Blaster, made a lucky revolve so that the blaster beam waved across Unicron's left arm and severed it at the elbow, leaving it stuck by the hand in his neck. Dark Energon retaliation came toward Vector and his helpers in fusillades, but the

downward blow to kill Prima was stopped as Unicron launched missiles and braced himself to gear for a second shockfront. We would not survive another.

Vector, jacked into a bit of life by the connection of Amalgamous's Spark energy, formed a portal, and together he and Amalgamous pushed *Thirteen* through it with all their remaining might, as if the impetus would help him. Afterward, spent, they lay in the dark rain of debris and dust churned from the lunar battlefield and tried to turn to see what would happen. Amalgamous watched, forming himself into a protective cage around Vector as Vector closed his eyes and connected to Maximo.

"Maximo, I hope you have access. The time is now."

Liege Maximo's voice was slow, slurred, and dull as he replied—heavily poisoned, he seemed on the verge of oblivion or insanity. ". . . Equal payments . . . Got it. Right here. Unfulfillable conditions, no loop counter, no exit. Logical eternity in the space of a cycle."

"I'll loop you," Vector murmured, trying to growl. "Access the cycle counter and replace it."

Unicron, finding himself in a lull, put Prima into his mouth, turned and reached for his severed arm, and stuck it back in place. He crunched Prima and spat him out, hard, into the pale moon dust. On the remains of the comm, we all heard Maximo swearing as he struggled to obey complex instructions from Vector, Vector's hissed replies, and then *Thirteen*'s quiet voice. "I am here. His Spark is before me." At that point our comm went dead. Unicron hesitated, clutching his chest, then apparently decided it was not a problem and carried on, roaring fury.

And then, he stopped.

Between one cycle and the next he simply ceased. The entire Dark Energon field and all his activities shut down. There was a strange moment of noise and fury from my perspective: scraplets scattering, systems screaming through emergency shutdowns—although if seen from the outside, I would have known he was, in fact, altforming into the same planetary body-shape that Primus had taken in stasis. His lights dimmed and went out.

And so, scattered, broken, helpless, despairing, surrendered, we won.

After a time, we slowly regrouped, the wounded helped by those in slightly better shape in a limping convoy that took a long journey home in tiny jumps as Vector gained and lost consciousness. But we were all present. Against the odds, we all survived, at least for now, and we made it to Cybertron at last and lay there under the familiar sun, silent and somber in the glory of our victory.

We could not forget, each of us, how we had fallen so quickly and easily to the dark. We had dreamed of winning, but not what it would cost, and we were different from that moment onward, each of us disappointed in ourselves in our own ways, confused by the interior nature of the war that we had supposed would be dealt with in rage, justice, and physical might. We had seen other realities and lost our innocence, forever. In doing so, we had stepped beyond our progenitors, though we did not realize it at the time.

Opposite: Amalgamous Prime, the shape-shifter

THE WAR OF THE PRIMES

What I am about to relate now in a very short space is something that took place over a long span of time. It is not possible to render every moment or action of what happened, as I was not present for most of it. I can only explain my own experiences, and those in a fashion very after the fact—something that I can see relatively clearly now, but which at the time was quite obscure to me, despite my own involvement in it at a very deep level. It concerns the aftermath of the battle and the emergence of our true natures, once we were not united by necessity and our role as tools in the hands of a master builder, whose grand project I struggle even now to comprehend. I would like to attribute it to malice, to paint it all with the colors of jealousy, anger, ambition, greed . . . all those easy-to-understand emotions. But there is an element to it beyond all that, which makes those feelings seem petty and insignificant by comparison. No, this was of an order of subtlety and magnitude and motivation that defies easy and perhaps any analysis. I write years after the fact, and I am no nearer to understanding it now than I was then. Perhaps you, with your much greater human social divisions and interactions, will comprehend it better.

We returned victorious, in good spirits and with a sense of achievement, although beneath that veneer, a lingering shadow remained in each one of us that no amount of celebration could truly banish. It was the cold, dark touch of Unicron to which we had all been exposed, and, I believe, it is our failure to recognize it for what it was and to talk of it that was the root of our trouble later. But we thought it was temporary, a sickness from which we would recover in time. As we each turned to first fixing ourselves and then to making something of a habitable world, we became absorbed in our own tasks and ideas, and the malaise was lifted by occupation. Perhaps at night alone sometimes we might feel it, in the dark and restless hours of downtime. Then it emerged, soft and dreamy, like a heavy mist, and pulled thoughts in strange directions; wonder became worry,

Right: The Forge of Solus Prime resting on her anvil.

hope became anxiety, mistakes became cudgels to beat ourselves with, and the follies of the others festered and brewed the acid of resentment. But with each new dawn we pushed it aside as merely a feature of the battle that must be endured, as if it were a mere illusion of the night. Eventually we were habituated and did not feel it at all. So, without any means to track it, we each fell prey to its delicately corrosive tendrils.

In saying this it seems I blame it, blame Unicron for what was to come; at the time that is how we considered it. Now it's clear that isn't true. What could any of that negative energy have done with nothing to feed it? But it found fertile ground. It didn't feel like poison. That's what I can't forgive.

SEEDS OF FATE

The beginning was harmless enough. We naturally divided into groups whose work interested one another, whose tempers suited one another. One group was composed of Prima, Vector, and myself, with occasional visits from those who didn't entirely fit anywhere: *Thirteen* was one and Alchemist another. We soon formed a view of the world that was logical and orderly, expecting everything to be regulated. We worked to build our part of the larger project of creating a settlement and also the basics of large vehicles, including starships, in cooperation with the others. But we also talked, and the talk was usually of governance and gradually of the failings of the rest, who lacked focus and discipline and allowed themselves to wander about in speculation, when they ought to have been doing other things. We got some of our news about the other project sectors from *Thirteen*, but mostly it came from Maximo, who was the coordinator and who passed regularly among all of us with information and support.

A similar process bonded the other groups. Megatronus, Maximo, and Amalgamous were anarchic, and although they also completed their allotted tasks, the Energon supply and the refining, they did so with a resentment at the notion that Prima and the rest of us would be organizing how things were to go. We had calculations and preparations for everything under way to create what we anticipated would be a vibrant community, always with community spirit at heart. They tended to see us as bossy and unnecessarily interfering.

The members of the third group, Micronus, Onyx, Solus, and Nexus, were left out of this political process by their own lack of interest in it. They were absorbed in creative jobs and reacted badly to both rules and the power-mongering of the others. They saw outsiders as too rigid and too unimaginative.

Thirteen, Alchemist, and Quintus were roughly welcomed anywhere although they never gelled with any particular set or each other in the same way. They were peripheral to the unfolding of the central power debate. Among us Maximo drifted, giving everyone his absolute, unconditional support. He did it individually too. He had wonderful charm.

I have made it sound simple. It wasn't. Personal feelings went on regardless of groups. Megatronus had never lost his adoration of Solus for granting him the Blaster and the armor before that—it went beyond mere respect and friendship; I believe it held a sacred meaning for him which he never expressed openly, but which smoldered through all he did in regard to her. He wouldn't stand for any criticism of her, often visiting her and there tolerating people's

presence and opinions that in other circumstances he had no time for.

Solus, in turn, enjoyed the quality of his attention and it made her feel special—everyone else got the usual gruff reactions of his unadulterated self, blunt to the point of rudeness. She was treated with eloquent kindnesses. He even went out of his way to bring her curiosities that he found during his work excavating and building the infrastructure of the Energon refinery that he, Micronus, Nexus, and Maximo had designed. They would speculate about these odd devices or partial components that must once have belonged to Primus for long periods, and rest together in their downtime afterward, leaning on each other like two bridge supports. They loved each other. It was obvious, and, to some of us, curious—an emotion that people like myself, Vector, and Prima, for instance, could recognize but would be surprised to ever feel. We were so self-contained that it was difficult to imagine more than a sense of well-being and satisfaction as the pinnacle of a social relation. To us, love was the result of imaginative fantasy—a dream of another with which one was in love, not their actual being, like the dream of a happy future where everyone was cooperative, or any number of other idle daydreams that were pleasing but irrational. We viewed it, I am sad to say, as a flaw, but their happiness in it prevented us from saying so except to each other.

Thirteen, Onyx, and Micronus, on the other hand, were quite the reverse in opinion. They smiled on that and other closer relationships with a kind of secondhand pleasure in them, obviously comforted and consoled in moments of boredom and frustration (of which there were very many since we started out unskilled and clueless from the ground up). Onyx and Solus had a similar relation to that of her and Megatronus; Nexus and she had a tempestuous but apparently endlessly interesting series of on-off, hot-cold tussles, while Micronus was more of a sparring intellect to her. *Thirteen* was a quiet, devoted friend—I am not sure I could equate that to the other states since every one was unique, but they were close and had no quarrels.

These were the friends that Megatronus had to work his hardest to accept. He begrudged every moment they got under her interested, mercurial gaze, and only his focus on her enjoyment of them kept him civil. Somehow she was the focus of them, in a way that none of the rest of us were. She was the hub of a wheel. I always assumed it was because she was the core of the factory that made everything we needed, and we needed so very much, but now I'm not sure. She was the most accepting of us, of anyone, even someone like Prima who became increasingly cool, distant, and critical as time went on.

Prima and I most often kept company while Vector dotted about the solar system, mapping it and attempting analysis of the other planets and their moons. Prima worked with steady attention, constructing microcircuits for the Sigma project—a task that soon became tedious—and talked, refining his theories of what we were, the Thirteen Primes, and what we ought to be doing. He slowly developed a set notation for the way he thought Primus had made us, which explained our behavior. He viewed himself and the early Primes as forces for lawful good. The central few were a mishmash of traits but basically still good, as he saw it, though careless of methodology and therefore open to corruption. The final few, with the exception of *Thirteen*, he considered chaotic, with varying degrees of potential malice.

I disputed him often, pointing out that Primus, even if he most closely resembled Prima and Vector, had been an insufficient foil to Unicron and was therefore not actually superior as a being, but Prima could only see Megatronus and Maximo, with their odd, occasional satellite visitors, as destined to express malevolence, selfishness, and although he didn't use the word, evil. If Vector was present, in analysis mode, he tended to agree with Prima, and although I kept to my objections, I felt they were not noted as significant by either. This irked me a good deal, and I slowly grew more like a silent partner, basically sulking, though I did not, and somehow could not, find the energy to break away from the group. I didn't think anyone else would particularly welcome me.

Megatronus and Maximo, sometimes with Quintus, sometimes Amalgamous or *Thirteen*, were the dual core of our opposing faction. They were antiauthoritarian and against everything Prima was trying to stand for; they disapproved of his leadership at meetings where we all sat and were content even if no consensus was reached. They stood for a kind of anarchic freedom that came into existence naturally at first but which then coalesced into a rebellious agenda in reaction to Prima's and Vector's repeated attempts to impose a hierarchy and command structure to our team.

It had a feeling of inevitability on the day when Maximo discovered Prima's diagrams describing them as agents of chaos and let it slip while working with Megatronus—Megatronus threw down his tools and stomped off to find Prima, his ever-ready rage stoked into a furnace heat. He burst into the enclave where we usually sat to do all our fine detail work and sent the door banging off its hinges. Delicate instrumentation collapsed off two of the unsecured benches. Prima was on his feet a cycle later, glowering,

"What is the meaning of this?"

"Yeah, that was my thought too," Megatronus snarled, barreling forward past the benches to get right in Prima's face. "Chaos and evil. That's really what you think, is it? Then you can have it!" He punched Prima squarely on the jaw, a blow that lifted him off his feet and sent him crashing into Vector at the mapping station, smashing its delicate surface to smithereens and knocking both of them to the floor.

"I'm sorry. I was feeling a little *chaotic*," Megatronus said, waiting for them to get up. "Maybe a little evil—after all, made nearly last in the sequence means not as good as you, doesn't it?" He couldn't wait and lunged forward as Prima stood up, going for another jab, but he got blocked and thrown over Prima's hip. Another table went over, and everything on it.

I grabbed up the *Covenant* and the Quill and got to my feet as Megatronus rebounded off the floorplates and went in a headfirst charge into Vector's midriff. The chances of saving anything else looked slim as Vector was run backward into the wall and the orrery charts. A display case next to him broke, and all the prepared models of the solar system went rolling like badly made ball bearings over the floor. Prima went to make a wrestling grab for Megatronus, put his foot on a lesser moon, and skidded onto his back with a crash. Vector hammered Megatronus's back and then suddenly vanished from his grip and reappeared with a bang of displaced air at my side. We watched together as the two of them regained

their feet. They trod on spheres left, right, and center. I had to struggle not to laugh, but it abruptly stopped being funny once all the balls had rolled away and Prima took the sword off his back and made a hack at Megatronus. It was halfhearted, more of a rebuke than an honest effort, but Megatronus's face darkened and his head lowered.

"Your uncontrolled violence only proves my point," Prima said, moving his blade in measured, formal practice strokes to illustrate his own mastery.

"You can shove your point where the sunlight don't reach." Megatronus, unarmed, swatted the wide blade away with the flat of his hand and stepped inside Prima's guard. The sword lowered and they stared at each other with keen dislike. "Hating isn't what good bots do. I guess that doesn't make you any good, does it?"

"What I said was merely a categorization for tendencies. A way of charting. Why are you upset? You always claim you are full of the shadows of Unicron. You take pride in it. How could I possibly offend you by agreeing?"

"Smooth words, old man," Megatronus said. "Almost worthy of Maximo. I took your burden and don't you forget it." He jabbed his finger into Prima's chest, stabbing with every word. "You owe me." Then his eyes looked across at Vector, then at me. "You too. And you. Write that down, Trion. Or are you just going to stand there with your jaw loose on its hinges for the rest of your life?" He straightened up, sneering, and shouldered past Prima with a sudden shove.

Prima, face set in a mask of loathing, stood aside and let him go. "You illustrate every point so beautifully," he murmured as Megatronus passed him.

Megatronus paused and turned to look Prima in the eye. They were almost close enough to touch. "Yeah, and you're such an example to everyone, doing what exactly? I mean, I build, and Vector does research, and Alpha Trion writes stuff down, as if anyone's ever gonna read it, but what do you do that's any use, Prima? What?" He laughed and left, kicking the remains of the door before him in a satisfied manner.

Prima stood and put his sword away, speaking casually, as if what had happened was of no consequence. "He is so easily provoked." We set about clearing up the mess. I remembered Megatronus's look of contempt, and it burned me. I nursed it, and it became the seed of my own dislike of him. I stopped contradicting Prima after that.

Maximo's practice of being kind, supportive, and undermining faltered the day he fell out with Solus, when she refused to make him a set of armor.

"I don't see the point," she said. "We're not in a war, and we're not going to be. This is practically an invincibility suit. What do you need it for?"

Maximo, nonplussed for a moment by her refusal—she never refused—fished around for a moment before plucking out, "I'm building and testing some creatures. I was concerned they might get out of hand, and when I'm out there, it's isolated. There wouldn't be anyone to come help me."

"Creatures?" Alchemist and *Thirteen* said from where they had been observing her work at the Lathe.

"Quintus helped me to make them. It's lonely here. Just us thirteen. Not so much going on. I thought we could use them for, um . . . as entertainment or as something to do, something to watch. Maybe as companions. They're only small so far. I was trying to set them up to be heuristic learning robots, so they'd teach themselves and evolve on their own. It's not going to be just us here forever, is it?"

Solus looked doubtful. "I haven't seen any creatures."

"I'll bring you one." He beamed a smile at her and went off, to return a short while later with a quadrupedal bot the size of her foot. It moved jerkily and didn't react to much, but when someone spoke, it turned and paid attention.

"Hmm, cute," she said. "But it doesn't have any . . . hey!"

As the machines in her anvils had been whirring, the little bot had turned to them and apparently taken a dislike to the frequency. It dropped down to the ground and opened its jaws to reveal a serious set of teeth with which it tucked into a power cable.

Maximo said apologetically, "I was trying to create an entire demographic. This is one of the more predatory ones. . . ." He bent down and tried to wrest the bot off its "prey." As soon as he pried its fangs out of the cable shielding, it attempted to sink them into his fingers. "Quit!" At his command it went limp. "Doesn't always work," he said. "Sometimes they just can't be stopped at all."

"Then what do you do?" *Thirteen* asked, peering closely at the frozen ball of metal in Maximo's hand.

Maximo made an equivocal face, "Mmm . . . I shoot them."

Onyx lumbered over to take a look. "They're not alive like us."

"No, not yet," Maximo said, enthusiastic. "But one day they might be."

"Where is this . . . farm?" Alchemist asked.

"Oh, a way away. They can't run this far unaided. Small power packs, you see."

"May I see it?" Onyx held out his hand. Maximo hesitated, then placed the bot onto his palm. Onyx lifted it to the height of his eyes and studied it, then poked it with his finger. It cringed away from him. "Doesn't like me." He looked past it at Maximo.

Maximo shrugged eloquently. "I just let them do whatever they do. It's a hobby. Nothing more." He looked at Solus.

"All right then," she said reluctantly. "But you've massively overspec'd this. How about something lighter?"

"Well, I might want to make bigger ones. That is. Some of the bigger ones are a little bit more feisty," Maximo said, making it sound like a suggestion.

"I want to see this farm," Alchemist said as Onyx handed the tiny bot back.

"You will! You will. But not yet. It's not ready yet," Maximo said. The bot woke up at his change of tone and looked up into his face expectantly. He thanked Solus and made a hasty exit.

Thirteen and Alchemist shared a troubled glance.

"I wonder how much bigger he means," Solus said, watching Maximo's back. She looked at the blueprints he had brought again. "Some hobby . . ."

Later, Maximo returned with Quintus, and they gave her a little one of the creatures as a pet. It was much more docile than the previous example and had no teeth at all, only small suckers that helped to anchor it in position on smooth surfaces and a mouth that it used to make soft noises and beeps. It learned quickly, and soon she had taught it to obey her vocal commands to sit, walk, and fetch basic items. She mellowed and started to make the armor suit.

A few days later I was looking for Prima to find out if he had finished his part of the hardware-building process for the Sigma project. He was not in any of the workshops.

Since I couldn't proceed any further without it, I set the task aside and went to see how the refinery was coming along. The place was deserted, although there were signs of recent work. At the Lathe workshop and the places that Quintus and Amalgamous inhabited it was business as usual. We passed a few minutes, and I went on my way, at a loss until I recalled Maximo's "farm."

I had no idea where it was, but I found sets of footprints that matched his in what I thought was the general direction and followed those. As I did so, I saw many of Megatronus's and Quintus's prints and another set later that I knew to belong to Prima. It was quite the trek into the hinterlands, and I wondered after a while when I was going to get there. Suddenly the path turned a corner and dropped into a steep, but natural, one-ended gully, and there it was.

At first all I noticed were some sheds and a large area zoned by electrified fencing of a small mesh size that blocked a lot of the view. Going closer, I heard the low buzz of the fence fields and the larger hum of a significant generator that must be powering them. Within the pens there were collections of oddly shaped small bots, most no bigger than knee high to me. They moved clumsily for the most part, jolting about, staggering here and there without obvious purpose, although none of them went near the fences except for a couple that had stumbled into them and become stuck. These seemed to have expired there. They made a cheeping noise in series, which after a while became noticeably a kind of code. I found myself intrigued and disturbed in equal measure as I followed the tracks to the sheds. As I got close, I overheard familiar voices raised in anger.

". . . serves no purpose, shut it down." This was Prima.

"It's not your business." Megatronus.

"Everything going on here is my business. I see no point in this other than the creation of a plague of monstrosities. End it. Or I will." Prima again.

"They're only tests, just like your tests in cosmology and time." Quintus, more reasonable and upset. "They aren't truly alive. You don't have jurisdiction, in any case. Nobody elected you leader."

"Prima, be reasonable, we've done nothing wrong, nobody is hurt." Maximo, sounding long-suffering.

"You have a nefarious scheme here, and I do not need to know the details to see that." Prima, more firm. "You have three days to recycle it all."

There were heavy footsteps, and I was still standing there as Prima came out. "What do you want here?" he asked, scowling.

"I was looking for you," I said.

"See the state of this place. . . ." He gestured around, head down, not looking at anything, and started the long walk back without another word, obviously expecting me to follow. I lingered, not sure what it was I had stumbled over.

"At least he didn't see the back pen," Maximo said, and Quintus laughed uneasily.

Without meaning to, I found myself looking after Prima's back—he made no effort to check if I was there. With the door to the shed closed and the others ignorant of my presence, I took a well-trod route around the buildings to see for myself.

The back pen covered a large area, and had only a few moving objects—all different—and a large number of strewn parts. While I was there the large bots inside didn't do much, but the parts spoke volumes about what had been done. Amid the churned ground they had clearly, for

whatever reason, been ripping one another to bits. One of them noticed me and looked up then, and I hurried away, feeling odd under its strangely calculating gaze. I passed the shed door again and overheard Maximo talking.

"You keep an eye on things here, Quintus. You've been doing a great job on the modifications. Until that suit is finished, there's no going into the cave pits, though. We leave them, even if they starve out. We can always refuel them later, although their memories will be wiped. I'd rather that didn't happen. Their strategic thinking was coming along in leaps and bounds."

"I'll bring you more generator packs," Megatronus said, although he sounded resigned rather than enthused.

"You're a good friend." Maximo again.

I heard footsteps coming and looked for an escape route. I hid behind a stack of empty component crates as he came out. He wasn't expecting anyone there and walked off, head down, as if brooding.

Inside, Quintus spoke too softly to hear, and Maximo giggled. I don't know what joke they shared, only waiting long enough for Megatronus to turn the corner at the gully end before making my own getaway. Maximo's last words lingered in my head. Just as I was leaving he'd said, "They'll never know what hit them."

The evidence seemed to confirm Prima's fears, but I had to admit, as I wrote later in the *Covenant*, that it was all circumstantial. Even so, I didn't like it.

HARVEST OF SHADOW

The next day I went back to the refinery to ask for power crystals that would be suitable to boot up an initial test run of our Sigma project. Megatronus was in a foul temper, thumping about and muttering to himself; even Maximo was keeping well away from him at the other end of the site. In spite of the work they had done for themselves at the farm, the refinery had basic operational capacity. With jaws clenched against his dislike of me and the company I kept, Megatronus did locate what I wanted and spent a little time tuning it up.

"Are you going past the Lathe at all, by any chance?" Maximo asked, his sunny tone quite different from Megatronus's glowering. Megatronus snorted at the question but said nothing, nearly shoving the power packs into my hands in his rush to be away.

"Uh, I wasn't planning to; why do you ask?"

"I just wondered how my armor was coming along," Maximo said airily. "No matter. I'll drop by myself later. How's the computer?"

He was such a breath of fresh air after Megatronus that we talked for a while about the developments, and he took a genuine interest in it such that by the time I left, I was feeling good about the enterprise and relieved that someone at least wasn't simply judging on appearances.

News of what Prima was planning to do and why spread rapidly around, and by the next day everyone was talking about it. Opinions were divided. *Thirteen* and Amalgamous seemed to object the most strongly to both sides, considering that secret manufactories were unnecessary and suspicious, but also that Prima's judgment was harsh and hasty. They petitioned for a debate, but nobody else was interested in one, especially Solus. This put Maximo out grievously, and he talked to her at length.

"But you make all kinds of things! Anything! Why should you be the only one who gets to say what gets made and what doesn't?"

"It's just . . . wrong," she said. "What are they *for*? You never say. Are they entertainment, are they target practice . . . will there be a war . . . who with? Why do we need defensive systems?" She gestured at the skies. "As far as we know, nobody's out there."

"As far as we know, they are," he countered. "And why should you have all the fun? Don't you like my little pet?" He gestured at the tiny botling he'd given her, which was holding her stylus obediently.

She looked at it, and her shoulders fell a bit. She liked the thing enormously and treated it with conversation as if it were one of us almost. "It feels wrong," she said at last, weakly.

"Come on, it's harmless. He's just doing it to put his own over on us as usual, and you know it. His pomposity has no end. It's killjoying. But he'd listen to you. He respects you. We all do. He'd change his mind."

She considered it. "No, I can't. You should have told us what you were doing. Don't you see that all this secrecy splits us up?"

"But I *did* tell you, and that's why I need the armor. Come on. I need it even if all I do is shut them down myself, okay? Is it ready?"

Solus studied for a moment and a familiar-to-everyone stubborn expression came over her face; she'd never be pushed on anything whether she agreed with the person or not. You had to wait for her to move in her own time. "Not quite."

"Please, Solus," Maximo said, making himself quite small before her. "I need it. I really need it. Maybe . . . maybe you're right, and I have gone a bit far. Some of them are definitely a mistake. But I don't think I should have to put myself in more danger to rectify that. That's all I want. To make it up to you all. To prove I didn't mean anything by it. It was just some fun, that's all. Out of hand. Please."

She put her hand out onto the anvil and looked down. "All right," she said quietly, the first time I ever heard her make such a concession. "Tomorrow."

"Great. Thank you. Thank you so much!" Maximo bowed and smiled, exited quickly before she had a chance to change her mind.

I watched her stay there for a while, and then she looked up at me. "What do you think?"

"I think they've got to go," I said, and she nodded, looking dissatisfied as if that were the answer to a question she hadn't asked. She went to a locker, one of many she had full of all kinds of things, and pulled out an object, which I realized, after a minute, was the armor itself in a packed-up form. It had obviously been finished for some time. She pulled it out to its full extent and laid the pieces on the anvil before her. On the workbench the tiny bot cheeped, and she smiled briefly at it. She looked the armor over doubtfully.

"Well," she said. "I just don't know." She looked at me again and shook her head.

I wasn't able to offer anything in reply, because suddenly I realized I had no idea if she was talking about her work on the armor or Maximo's plea or the creatures.

"There will be a vote," I said. "*Thirteen* demanded one."

She nodded. "I'll be there." She began to pack the armor away again and I left, having nothing more useful to add. It never occurred to me to mention what I had overheard about the back pen and the pits in the cave.

We convened for the vote at the end of that day, with one more yet to run before Prima's deadline. Everyone

present stood in a circle, shoulder to shoulder with their allies, and cast colored rocks into the center for their verdict, a red one to allow the farm to carry on, a gray one to vote against it. I had asked Prima to make the vote anonymous, but he had stolidly refused. "Let us see who our enemies are," were his words, and that is also the thought I read in Megatronus's and Maximo's faces as they stood in observance, their red rocks thrown.

"Come," I found myself saying, hesitating. "This is all so petty. Surely a few experiments in the long run of things are really nothing to worry over. We can't all have the same views on things and . . ."

Prima cut me off with a gesture of his hand. "It is not so much the experiment's nature as the fact of its secrecy I will not abide."

"Then you would permit another in its place?" Quintus asked, disbelieving.

"Just cast your votes. Civilization requires order," Prima said.

Prima threw in his gray stone, followed by Vector's, and Alchemist's, then Nexus's. *Thirteen* cast a red one, Onyx too, Micronus gray, Quintus red, Amalgamous red, my gray one. Solus stood, her hands clenched, staring at the even number of rocks. She looked up at Prima.

"Time rust you," she said coldly, and dropped a gray rock into the pile, turning and walking away, her head down. After a few strides, the red rock fell from her other hand to the ground, and then she covered her face and walked on. Megatronus's eyes blazed with hostility after her.

"Maximo, you will terminate that project by tomorrow sundown or we will all see it done together," Prima said coldly, apparently no happier in victory than he was in defeat.

I saw *Thirteen* move to say something to Megatronus, but Megatronus shook him off angrily and a moment later said something in contrast to that, tone apologetic, though I couldn't make out the words. Maximo, after a moment of blankness, suddenly smiled and shrugged his shoulders, turned and set off in the direction of the refinery.

Onyx watched them go at my side and said, "Is it only me, Alpha Trion, or does some madness stir here among us?"

I looked at him—it was rare for him to speak; he was a creature of deeds and presence rather than words most of the time, but I found him more astute than most. I nodded at him. "Some madness indeed."

"It will be long before it's done," he said, and went to follow Solus. For once I was unable to dismiss his remark as wishful mysticism. Micronus, who often shadowed him, lingered at my foot and added in a worried tone, "Do you think Prima is all right?"

I looked down. Prima was already far away on his steady march back to the workshops, Vector at his side.

"No," I said, but I was damned if I knew to say more, and after a minute Micronus nodded and scampered after Onyx. A few moments later, I heard scuffling behind me. Turning to look, I saw Amalgamous viciously kicking the stones in all directions, his body generating legs, feet, hands, claws, talons, as fast as he could fling them. Afterward he stood in the dust he'd raised and then shifted shape into a kind of giant ball of metal shards—something he'd lately developed and seemed to like—and sent himself bowling off into the distance.

The next events of the night and day that followed I can only relate as hearsay, for I wasn't present at any of them.

After the vote, Maximo, Megatronus, and Quintus convened at the refinery to discuss their plans. Maximo persuaded Megatronus to go and get whatever armor Solus might have made. His idea was that he would salvage the most successful monsters and take them away to live another day far from our observation. Megatronus was in a despicable mood, brooding and black, and he went grudgingly, after much wheedling on Maximo's part. Meanwhile, Maximo and Quintus left, ostensibly to shut down the "normal" operations at the test farm.

Some time later, a terrible noise of shouting and struggle, including the distinctive ring of a blow from the Forge, drew the attention of the nearest friends: Onyx, Micronus, and *Thirteen*, who had been quietly talking together at Onyx's nest. They were first on the scene. I arrived shortly afterward to the sound of Onyx's incessant, eerie howling.

Solus Prime lay dead, the Forge a short distance from her open hand on the ground. It was obvious she was dead, because a large circular piece was missing from her right chest and shoulder, including her Spark chamber.

Golden and brilliant streams of Energon and her life fluids ran down out of the massive gap and had pooled under her and spread far, following the tiny scores and marks of the ground so that she lay haloed by it inside a huge ring. Her face was frozen in an expression of total amazement, staring up into the sky, mouth open as if in the middle of saying something.

And Onyx's heartbroken screaming went on and on, slowly changing to rage bellows and steaming snorts of fire and hatred, a word taking shape in his cacophony, a little at a time, until it came once full-throated and ended on a shriek, followed by silence.

"Megatronus!"

The deed was done by the Requiem Blaster; that was sure. We knew its look only too well from what it had done to Vector in the battle. I stepped forward hesitantly, not really daring to get closer to Onyx in his stricken state, to try to say that we did not know for certain. The idea of Solus and Megatronus harming each other was patently ridiculous, but the evidence, combined with his conspicuous absence, seemed plain. From Vector to Quintus and Prima to Micronus, a look went around that said Megatronus was to blame, and he was going to pay.

Liege Maximo, closest to the front, surveyed the body with horror and a surprise that seemed almost gleeful for a moment as I watched him; then he checked himself, and his face became exactly as Prima's, as Alchemist's and my own. "I can't believe it! But, look at the weapon mark. He would never let anyone else touch that gun."

This was true.

"But, but . . ." Micronus was babbling in shock, "Never mind him. What about her? What will we do with her? She might be cold. She might be . . ." He leaped off Amalgamous Prime's slowly oozing shoulder as it deformed to a dismayed slump, and landed down beside Solus's empty face. "Solus! Solus! Don't be gone! You can't be gone. You just . . . can't be." He bent over to look into her eyes, hopefully, as if there was a chance at all she would still be in there.

Thirteen moved slowly past him under Onyx's black and smoldering gaze. For a moment I thought Onyx would attack him for going nearer to her, but he didn't. He held himself rigid in his vigil at her head and watched as *Thirteen*

gently reached down and offered Micronus his hand, so careful not to tread near the blood or disturb her where she rested. "She has returned to the AllSpark," he said quietly, his voice warm and kind, on the verge of breaking.

"But she can't have," Micronus objected, his tiny hand resting on *Thirteen*'s outstretched thumb. "I need her. We were making this new computer. . . . It was going to be so . . ." He stopped, shaking, holding himself up only with an effort. We all felt the same, to one degree or another.

Across this moment of peace Onyx leaped, a streak of pure hatred, and landed on top of Maximo, claws digging into him, grabbing for his throat. Maximo screamed shrilly, and Onyx tore several deep rents in him before Vector teleported him to the other side of the Lathe room and pinned him there by warp force, snarling and unrecognizable in his savage fury as he fought with every rivet of his being to free himself.

Maximo lay shaking on the ground, "Did you see that? He almost killed me!" He sounded outraged and terrified.

"Yes, well he didn't," Prima said, voice measured. "Where is Megatronus? Only he will be able to answer the questions that must be answered."

The others were too shocked to respond immediately.

"She was making me a new mandala," Vector said, his voice leaden.

"But she was so . . ." Nexus did not finish. "Why? Why?"

We stared at each other, as if the answer were going to be written there to read on our faces.

"It doesn't matter," Micronus said then. "It's still done . . . Oh, what is happening now?"

He was the first to notice, being closest, that the ground beneath Solus was starting to change. The blood had reacted with the metal plating of Cybertron's skin and that plating was slowly becoming soft, then liquid, in a chain reaction. It was creating a hollow that caused Solus' body to fold up and begin to sink. The soft gold and blue of the mixture became more volatile, more potent as the volume increased, and slowly but surely it started to eat a hole down through the ground in a nearly perfect circle.

"But . . . wha . . . Should we do something?" Alchemist said, nervous and staring at the changing metals.

"You're the expert!" Quintus said, "What's happening?"

"I don't know. I didn't see it before. Her blood is making the skin of Cybertron flow; that gold is like metallic Energon. . . . that blue is like, a kind of Sparked metal. . . ."

His speculation had to stop then as the reaction reached a critical mass. Solus's body melted too where it slumped into the flowing masses, and the blue glowed and intensified. We dared not interfere and shrank back as she vanished, the soft flow closing over her face, pouring like good oil into her open mouth. A soft heat shone out of the mass then, radiant with white and gold, accented with sparks of sapphire and teal. Where it touched us we all felt, just for an instant, the familiar and kindly touch of her hand, against a cheek, on a shoulder, in a palm, and then the mass began to swirl. Slowly at first, it soon gained speed, whirling ever quicker until it resembled an inverted tornado, a screwing, driving downward force in it that bored out a broad and perfect tube down and down into the depths of the crust. As this spinning drillhead drove deeper, it sank, leaving only the smooth-sided, shining silvery well behind it.

We stood in mute astonishment as the process continued, until we couldn't see it anymore, only light and soft heat radiating up at us from the depths.

"How far down is that going?" I asked, unable to help myself.

"To the Core," Alchemist replied, his eyes able to see the reactions much more clearly than the rest of us could. "Right down to the Spark Chamber of Primus himself . . ."

"And what does that *mean*?" Prima asked, leaning as far over the edge as he could without falling. Beside him, Amalgamous slapped a clawed foot over his boot to be sure he wouldn't topple in.

"Means there's a well that goes right to the core," Amalgamous said, though he couldn't smile or even pretend that was funny from his position as a twisting spire of metal. The tortured form expressed his feeling more than any words could have.

We watched for some time, but once it had been made, the Well did nothing more than glow gently with that sweet, warm radiance. Eventually, we realized no more would happen, but it was nice to be close to it. It had her presence in it somehow; even though it reminded us of what we had lost, it was comforting too.

At last Micronus stood up and looked at Vector. "Where did he go?"

Vector closed his eyes and searched a while, tracking. "He has fled very far," he said at last, with stern conviction. "But he is still here."

"You will take me to him," Micronus demanded, jumping up to Vector's shoulder.

"And me," Onyx said.

"And me," Nexus added.

Prima and *Thirteen* also stood and put themselves in the group.

"This should not be a lynching," *Thirteen* said strongly, shouldering in front of Prima, his hand gesturing down in a firm cut-off motion. "We do not know the truth yet." I did not think the others were listening to him. Their faces were avid with the hunting light.

Vector nodded solemnly, though he would not release frothing, growling Onyx from his vortex shackles in the Lathe. Within a moment they had all blinked out.

The rest of us shared a look of misgiving, though it could not be said what went through each bot's Spark—whether we regretted not joining them or if we wished they had not gone. In the aftermath of their departure, we lingered uncertainly, watching Onyx exhaust himself against Vector's impossible bonds.

"We don't actually know what happened here," Quintus said after a few cycles had passed. "I mean, nobody saw it."

"Events speak for themselves," Maximo said. "Are you trying to defend him? You know what a temper he had, and how much he resented the rest of us for not being 'as evil' as he was. He was a bomb waiting to go off."

Amalgamous hesitated. "That's not entirely true. He was resentful, but he showed no violence toward us. If anything, he turned that on himself."

Alchemist looked between them, thinking. "We must hope they give him a chance to put forward his side of the story."

"Well, the ones that went after him tell half the story," Maximo said, and a trace of bitterness and strange pleasure crept into his tone. "All her favorites. Think they're interested in hearing his side? Not likely. They'll be glad to get him out of the way. She was so stressed about making that armor, and it was all him pushing and pushing. Now it looks like he's pushed too far. Anyway"—he looked down with guilt and shame, and his voice became soft

and quiet—"all this time at the farm he's been plotting such things—you don't even know. I've tried hard to stop him but, there's a secret section to it that you really ought to see. I was hoping he'd see sense when Prima came to discuss it with us, but he insisted. . . . I never wanted that armor made. It was for him. So he could face his . . . fighting beasts."

We absorbed this in silence. His gaze pleaded with each of us. "I can't figure you out," I said then to him. "I thought you were his friend."

"I am!" he insisted. "Do you think I want to see him killed by those monstrosities? Why do you think I took all the responsibility for what was going on there? If Prima knew it was him masterminding it, then he would have been so much worse. I hoped in time that I could hold the rest of you off while I talked some sense into him or he had his fill of . . . of the violence."

I looked at Quintus, but he was staring at the Well, apparently struck dumb.

"Quintus?"

"Yes," Quintus said softly. "He's right. At first we were all in on the plan together. For fun. But he took it much, much too far. . . ."

And then there was nothing to do but wait for the rest to return.

The party of six who had gone in search of Megatronus found him easily, thanks to Vector's unerring ability to locate anyone at any time. He was alone on a distant, cold plain, standing, waiting for them. Crimson light shone from his eyes as he stood, braced, obviously waiting for an assault. Although it was not raised, the Requiem Blaster was in his hand, and he had his swords and other paraphernalia about him ready. His head was lowered.

"So you've come for your reckoning," he said. "What took you so long?"

"We would have your story," *Thirteen* said before the others could move, and his words held them back, though retribution was in their gaze.

Megatronus nodded, never taking his eyes off them. "Then you can have it."

Slowly they pointed their weapons down and stood in a loose semicircle facing him, *Thirteen* foremost. Megatronus paused and thought, then began. His voice was steady, the words slow and deliberate.

"I went to ask her about the armor that she was making for Maximo."

"And what for really?" Micronus blurted suspiciously. "The war is over. A few little bots? Ridiculous. She never finished it. . . ."

Thirteen gestured at him to hold his peace. "Let us hear it all."

Megatronus gazed at Micronus a long moment, held his arms out, fully clad in the armor as Micronus looked on, hesitantly, then continued. "She finished it weeks ago."

There was a general stir at this remark and shared glances between the listeners. Suspicion and questions flickered in their faces, but they looked to *Thirteen* and said nothing as he shook his head and then inclined it, waiting for Megatronus to proceed.

Megatronus sighed heavily and looked at the arid ground, dug the point of one of his swords into it. "That bot . . . that pet of hers. It wasn't just a pet. Maximo used it to monitor everything she was doing: who she saw, what she did, what she made, what she said." He ground

his jaws together, paused. "I found the receiver when I was looking for a shock prod at the farm. I didn't know what it was at first. Then it came on and I realized—it was recordings of everything, everyone." His gaze slid and cast scarlet marks over Nexus, lingering. "I thought she was proud of me, but it turned out she just thought I was Maximo's fool. I heard her say it."

His face twisted into a mask of fury, and the sword he had dug in the ground sank halfway along its length under the pressure of his hand. He stared at the dust between them, his jaws working, before he continued.

"I went to see her to ask about Maximo's armor, with all this in my mind, botherin' me. Since I heard her say it I couldn't think of anything else. But before I can get to it, she says she's concerned about the armor—she doesn't want to hand it over to Maximo. Then I see that she's finished it; it's right there on one of her thermal anvils. So I go to take a look and she says, 'No, leave it; I changed my mind.' But we need it because of the things in the pit: we've got to have it."

He paused for a moment. "I think then that she's in it with you and always has been; it was all just words to get me to do what you wanted. It was only a way to keep me in my place. Maybe. I got real angry. Then she says, 'Maybe it's time you handed in the Blaster too. There's no need for it anymore. We only made it for the war.' Then I'm sure she never loved me." He glared at Nexus. "I went to pick up that armor to see it, to show her I wasn't ready to be treated like some dumb grunt. And she reaches out to stop me, grabs me, and tries to stick me to the decking with some magnetic thing she's got and I push her. . . ." His arm above the sword shot out here, strong, inexorable, in the same gesture.

"She slides up backward and ends up against one of her benches, and the Forge is lying on top of it. I pick up the armor, and I click the command clip to get it to open out, so I can see exactly what scrap it is that Maximo really wanted, and see if he's lying to me too. I want to know who's really got it in for me. Nothing's going to stop me. Then this little piece of scrap, that bot, throws itself into my face . . . so I shoot it. I can hear her screaming I've killed an innocent creature and I turn—she's got the Forge raised and she's bringin' it down on me with both hands in this strike. It's all so clear, right then. She hates me. I hate her. And I don't even think. I just shoot."

Megatronus smiled, not pleasantly. "I always was the fastest draw." He straightened up, yanked the sword out of the ground, and flipped it to the scabbard on his back. "You know what the last thing she said was as she was dying? She said, 'I . . .'" but for some reason he stopped, silent. Then he reached around and plucked something from a storage slot on his belt. He opened his huge fist, and they saw the tiny pet bot's head there. He prodded something on the back of it, and for a few seconds they were able to see a weak, grainy, off-center image of Solus Prime lying on the floor, her eyes dimming as she looked at someone out of shot. Her voice was weak but still audible, "I'm so sorry, Megatronus." Her hand reached out on the good side of her. "I love. . . ." But then it fell back and the light went out. Her arm hit the floor with a dull clang.

Micronus, Vector and Prima, Nexus, and *Thirteen* stood together, facing Megatronus.

"So," Prima said as Megatronus folded the head back into his fist. "It was a mistake? Is that what you are saying?"

Opposite: The death of Solus Prime

Thirteen and Nexus looked on, listening, so surprised by what Prima chose to say after Megatronus's revelation that they were temporarily transfixed. Then Nexus moved slowly around to flank Megatronus, shackles hanging from his massive hand. "We've not come for death, only to bring you in," he said, though they'd agreed to nothing of the sort.

"Yeah, you and what army?" Megatronus snarled, backing and keeping Nexus well in sight. His finger twitched on the trigger. His voice came out muffled, as if his jaws were clenched together.

"Tempers are short, everyone is hurt," *Thirteen* said, emulating Prima's calm. "No need for this. It was an accident."

"No!" shrieked Micronus. "How can it be? We only have his word for it!" He was already changing into a miniature form of Onyx, a demented metal monkey god, quivering with righteous fury. *Thirteen* put his hand out, but Micronus slapped it aside. "No, he won't get away with this! He was never able to control his temper!"

"Megatronus?" *Thirteen* said.

"I deny nothing," Megatronus growled. "But I'll not be judged by you, you dry, oil-less slagheap." He looked at Prima. "If you ever had a kind feeling, it was only for a principle, never for anything living. You're pathetic."

"Come back with us," *Thirteen* said. "We'll deal with it together."

Megatronus looked at him and finally nodded. There was, in any case, really nowhere for him to go that Vector would not find him.

"Everything's wrong," Micronus whispered, trembling.

"We will find a way," *Thirteen* said with absolute determination. He looked to Prima, who met his gaze with a strange look but gave a nod of agreement and stepped aside to let him be first to go home.

When they arrived, Maximo was the first to point the finger at Megatronus. "You got him! Thank goodness. I thought you might . . . well, thank goodness."

Megatronus, not shackled, the Blaster still in his hand, halted and looked Maximo in the eye. He tossed the head of the petbot to him with his other hand, and Maximo flinched, though he caught it.

"What's this?"

"Thought you might like your puppy back," Megatronus said, quiet and level, his voice like the slide of a planing tool over rough cast.

"I don't understand." Maximo rolled the head between his fingers.

"I saw your recordings," Megatronus said.

Everyone was silent, watching, waiting, even Onyx in his bonds.

"My . . . but they were only incidental. I never watched them. It was just part of the experimental program, you know that. Long-range tracking transmission, video, audio . . ." He laughed, as if it were all foolishness, and he was so genuine that for a second we all felt that Megatronus must have misunderstood. "Anyway, even if you did see—you could have put it aside once you realized you were spying on her private time. Didn't you?"

"I was thinking about that," Megatronus said. "Why would you leave something like that in the handling gear? It had no place there. Unless you wanted me to find it."

"Wanted you? What a ridiculous notion. Why would I do that? It probably fell off my tool belt when I was looking

for the harness restraints. Anyway, it's pointless to argue about that now, wouldn't you say? When there are still your creatures in the pit to deal with." His eyes glittered.

Those of us who had stayed behind looked at Megatronus for answers only to find his face blank.

"You don't deny you enjoyed fighting them against your little test pets, do you?" Maximo said, still smiling as if everything were fine. "I mean, if you don't believe me, you only have to go and look," and he turned and looked at the rest of us with a simple shrug.

There was a sudden hubbub as everyone started demanding explanations at once. After a time, someone from either side filled in the gaps in everyone's knowledge until we were all up to speed. Onyx was freed on a warning, and we all went out to the farm together. Vector blinked out on the way and when he returned he handed Prima the Star Saber, his own weapons in hand. He attempted to give me a pistol, but I declined it. Nexus took it instead, fist closed on the Cyber Caliber.

At the farm, the foremost pens were empty, neat heaps of scrap parts in the corners to reveal the fate of the inhabitants. The fences were silent. We passed them, and Maximo led us behind the sheds to the larger pens where I had seen the debris and the other bots. This was also finished up. At the sheltered end of the gully, down a long natural chasm overhung deeply enough by a cliff to be called a cave, we found several deep pits.

"In there," said Maximo, pointing but not going closer to the open voids. "He made them and put them in there."

"I didn't make 'em," Megatronus growled. "You and Quintus did that. I just handled 'em when you didn't have the steel for it."

"Quintus?" Maximo said confidently.

"It was a joint decision," Quintus said.

"Look at this. . . ." Vector called Prima over and Thirteen went too. It was quiet, so after a moment we all went to see. Inside one pit, not inhabited, were the savaged remnants of several large dummies, each of them clearly identifiable as a reasonable-looking copy of Prima, Vector, Alchemist, Nexus, and myself . . . Things that might have been Onyx once were scattered about, chewed and torn, burned and holed.

"The target range," Maximo said.

Everyone looked at Megatronus.

"I never saw this scrap before," he snarled, glaring at Maximo. "You lying little oilrag. You set me up! You left those recordings of Solus for me to see and now you made this and put it here—when were you doing that, hmm? Last night after you sent me away? You and Quintus?" He rounded on Quintus, who cringed away from him.

"It wasn't my idea!" Quintus whined.

Megatronus raised his gun.

"Look! Even now he can't stop himself! He's out of control," Maximo cried, a strange hysteria in his face that seemed to draw all the tension between us to a fine point. "Stop him!"

Just at that moment the sound of the raised voices was answered by a rumbling, unnatural screech and growl from the second pit behind us. There were lights overhead, just enough to see three massive, bestial shapes emerge from holes into the larger pit zone. They moved with a soft, predatory glide, hissing and gleaming with exposed Energon conduits, fully powered up. We were all distracted by the sight. In that moment Maximo rushed forward with all his speed and force and cannoned into Megatronus, knocking him back and into Vector and Nexus. Quintus

also made a sally but a halfhearted one that could have been an attempt to grab Maximo—or not. The commotion and the unstable ground, the sudden shock, all took their toll. As Prima, Vector, and Nexus toppled into the pit where the creatures prowled, dragging Onyx with them, Maximo got to his feet and made a run for the exit path.

Amalgamous shot out a tentacle and snagged Maximo's foot and then—as if this simple action of Maximo falling, combined with the screams of rage and slaughter from the pit, created a perfect alchemical reaction—the energy of the place surged and the misery and anxiety, grief and anger all coalesced within us. We joined, as we had once joined in organized ranks to fight a common foe. But this time there was no common foe, only the nearest enraged and wild-eyed body. Even I, unarmed save for the Quill and my hands, bent to pick up a bar of metal and use it as a mace in a crazed frenzy of violence and glee, bashing and smashing at anything within reach, a red haze over all, a mad, chaotic delight within, and a sense of overweening and intense liberation. *Thirteen* tried to block me, I think, as I made a great plunge down to whack Prima's head while he tried to scrabble out of the pit. He knocked me aside, but Alchemist then came between us, swinging, and within seconds we had all gone over the edge into the pit below. We fell as a pack, ripped and tore; there was no end in sight, only the unleashed glee of giving vent to all the fury, the hope, and the disappointment at once.

INTO THE LIGHT

I awoke a long time later, battered but whole—one of the more fortunate. *Thirteen* was also relatively unscathed, and he was the one over me, trying to rouse me with the careful use of an electrojolt reviver machine from the medical suite. As I slowly got up and came to my senses, the devastation around me was a shock like battery acid on the skin.

In the pits, the experimental beasts were dead, their bodies so dismembered that only parts smaller than a hand remained. The Primes who had been in there had got out and lay with the rest in a scatter of exhaustion, all wounded to some degree. In the midst of us, the remains of Liege Maximo lay in several sections, wires and internal components twisted and stretched where he had been ripped limb from limb. His head was almost destroyed by a single shot from the Requiem Blaster, though I did not recall it going off. I recalled nothing at all.

In silence we slowly assembled. Onyx had been fatally injured, having taken the brunt of the beastbot assaults, and Quintus and Alchemist required carrying. Somehow we made it back to our settlement and gathered around the edge of the Well, unable to speak a single word or look one another in the eye. It was a long time before any of us could do that.

In the megacycles that followed, we built a tomb to the memory of Solus Prime, at a point in space suggested by the *Covenant* and marked in all directions by the most beautiful and brilliant constellations, lit by a solitary silver moon.

It was decided that Maximo could not rest there, and so we put his pieces back together and built a nameless

Opposite: The Primes tear one another apart

tomb for him upon Cybertron. We concealed it in a fissure that would one day be built over and all but forgotten. For eon upon eon it lay ignored, until it was raided and his arm hacked unceremoniously off and stolen for a dark purpose, but that was far, far in the future. At this time we gave him a small ceremony, which neither Megatronus, Onyx, nor Vector attended, though Onyx could not have been there in any case as he was so close to death.

For Solus, however, we held a full celebration of all that her life had meant to us. We set off fireworks and guns (not the Blaster obviously, as Prima had taken that away somewhere for safekeeping) in huge displays, and laid out everything that remained of her makings, including the Forge. In the absence of a body, we laid that upon the tomb's surface. If anything could still have held her spirit, it was that. We sat around her pyres throughout the night and told her story and all we knew of her. Only Megatronus was silent and hung his head throughout, or stared into the flames. He sat apart, listening but not moving.

In the morning he was first to rise, as the sun's rays crested over the edge of her monument and lit the decorations on its surface—hieroglyphs that told the story of who she was. He faced us all in the weak light.

"I'll be leaving now," he said, quietly. He had put on the armor that Solus had made. "Like Solus said, out there are other worlds and other people. Where there are people there will be problems. I have strength, power, and the will to do what must be done. I am the Fallen now, killer of my friends, a foolish fool, but Solus Prime saw something in me, and I am going to find a way to live up to that. Until I do, I won't return. Make something worthy of her while I'm gone. For her." He picked up his weapons, put them on, and looked up at the stars. He turned to Vector.

"I know we don't see eye to eye, but I'd be grateful if you could make a bridge for me. Anywhere far away from here."

Left: The Triptych Mask

"Take the ship," Prima said, standing up himself. He gestured to the starship we had all been making before this happened. It was not really finished, but it had fuel and an engine that worked, and it was spaceworthy. We had come in it to this place, but Vector could easily take us back to Cybertron.

Prima walked across to Megatronus and handed him the chip that would operate the navigational and power systems. "Until we meet again."

"We probably won't," Megatronus said, taking it with a nod of acknowledgment. He turned and began his way up the ramp that led to the landing deck.

Thirteen got up and called out to his back, "We will wait for you."

Megatronus did not turn, but he paused and raised one arm for a moment in a version of the salute we had once all made. "You do that." He opened the door of the ship, vanished into the dark entrance, and it closed behind him. A few cycles later, the engines started and the ship undocked. It moved slowly out to a safe distance before igniting the main drive. It ran sweetly, so quiet, so fast—a sudden dart that was soon lost against the backdrop of the stars.

We returned to Cybertron by space bridge, sober and no longer angry, purged of everything except the need to find a purpose that could fit us now—something worthy of Solus Prime, as Megatronus had said, the seed of his suggestion foremost in all our minds.

Without Solus it became apparent that Onyx himself would soon die, not only from his wounds, but also through the loss of his will that her death had caused him. He looked out in silence from hollow eyes, the Triptych Mask limp in his claws. Sometimes he looked through the last face, Mournsong.

"What do you see?" Micronus said anxiously.

"I hoped to see where they have gone, but all I see is the AllSpark." Onyx shifted, uncomfortably. He called for *Thirteen*, and after a short while they brought others to their conference—Quintus, then Alchemist, Nexus, Vector, Prima, Amalgamous, and after those, myself. By the time I arrived, many ideas were already circulating concerning a plan for the memorial that we would build in honor of our dead and gone, and in commemoration of our victory. It took us another few megacycles to thrash them out entirely until all of us were satisfied that the outcome represented the best that we had to offer. In the end, what we came up with surprised and pleased us all.

We decided that it was time we left center stage ourselves, as Primus had done. With our task to restrain Unicron complete, we had the power to open the way for new Cybertronian beings: our tribute to the fallen and the manner of our own falling was to create a new race descended in pattern from each archetype of the original Thirteen, but with infinitely more variation crafted into their makeup by Onyx and the Triptych Mask. The Sparks for this new life would arise from the Well, generated in the Spark Chamber of Primus with his blessing, which we received as new pages opening in the *Covenant*.

"But we should not abandon them," Prima said.

"All the same, we should not dominate them," Alchemist replied. "We have proven ourselves no superiors."

"Some kind of guiding authority?" I suggested.

"But they will not be like us," Amalgamous said. "We should not assume their forms and trials will be as ours."

"We should presume to guide only where we have experience," Vector said.

"I propose the following," *Thirteen* put in. "As we have established so far, Onyx will enter the Well and with his mask take the place of the Lathe, creating the blueprints of those to come. He will survive there, close to the AllSpark, sustained by the energy of Primus. Alpha Trion, you must remain as you are to keep the records. Vector, you have agreed to watch over space-time anomalies, in particular anything that might cause Unicron to recover. The rest of you are free to pursue your guardianship of your own powers any way you wish. I choose to undertake the life of a new, ordinary bot. My Prime abilities will be hidden, even from myself, so that I may live as one of them and learn to know them that way. If you need me to return to the role of a Prime, then you may awake me as you see fit, but not for anything less than a most dire crisis."

"It can be done," Alchemist said, already pondering the details of this new transmutation. "The Well itself has the capacity to remake you in this way, with Onyx acting as the designer. I shall not follow you. I have much I wish to learn in this form. Indeed, I've barely begun."

"Our new world will need neighbors one day," Quintus said. "I shall travel far and experiment with bringing life in different ways in the hope that one day they will find allies abroad."

"I will stay and keep an eye on matters here," Prima said. "Help Alpha Trion, where I can and ensure there are no serious malfunctions. I will also remove the Blaster to a place of concealment where none shall accidentally find it."

"I will also remain for a while at least," Amalgamous said. "I like the idea of new forms, and besides, there is still this computer to finish. I have some theories I'd like to test about that before I make new plans. I will also give the pattern of my T-Cog to Onyx, so that all the new Cybertronians will have the ability to take on alternate forms. Just the one at a time though." He smiled.

"I'm not sure," Micronus said. "I'll think of something. Are you sure, *Thirteen*?"

"Yes, I am," *Thirteen* said. I think he was looking forward to it; there was the trace of a smile on his face. "It feels right. This is the most positive thing we could do."

Nexus was last to speak, "I think I'm going to make sure that the worst of our weapons and those other artefacts are well hidden away for a long, long time. After that I'll return and do what I can to finish the projects Solus started—especially the computer. Vector, I think before you retire to your observation post, you might install that quantum processor system you were planning. None of us are capable of making such a thing."

"I will," Vector said. "I should probably warn you, however, that it will allow the machine some abilities not unlike my own. You may wish to consider safety mechanisms to protect it from unforeseen interference. I will repair the main space bridge also, and leave instructions for its operation with you."

The hour before we were due to enact our final plans, *Thirteen* came and sat down with me, looking over my shoulder at the *Covenant*. "I think," he said, "that it might be wise to erase my name from the record as it stands, for if it was found and read, then I could be found too.

Opposite: Thirteen carries Onyx, the Triptych Mask, and the hidden Micronus into the depths of the Well of All Sparks

The purpose of my living will be to experience all of life as they do, not as a special person. I only want to be restored if the need arises, and not before."

I held the Quill and considered. "I will go through and replace it with this," and I wrote the glyph for 13. "What do you think of that? Later, if you return, we can always put it right again." I hesitated. "*Thirteen*, what if you die without ever . . . returning?"

"I do not know. I must hope that fate is kind, but if not, then at least it was worth trying, yes?" He smiled.

"Yes," I said. The plan had been all our salvations. We all had purpose now, regardless of grief or losses. We had a reason to live.

We assembled at the Well to give one another our best wishes and say a prayer for the dead and the gone. The spirit was gentle but kind, and we were all quietly optimistic. In the end, Micronus climbed into the quilled and bladed ruff around Onyx's neck and hid there, unwilling to be parted from his friend. I was glad they were together, more than I can say, though it meant one fewer of us abroad in the world during the long ages to come.

Thirteen picked up Onyx, who was barely conscious, and stepped forward.

"So ends the era of the Primes," he said, "but not our brotherhood, for all are one."

We raised our arms in salute.

A rush of light came up to meet them as they descended, slowly. We watched them vanish into the depths until they were swallowed amid the rising of the low, distinctive voice of Primus welcoming them home.

THE AGE OF EVOLUTION

And so it was that the damaged body of Onyx Prime sank into the Well, *Thirteen* carrying him, trusting in our plans and the will of Primus. As they disappeared from view, we struggled to see what was happening, but could not, for the light of Sparks in the depths was so great that it blinded us. They were swallowed in the blaze upon the instant.

I wondered what it was like to be unmade and shuddered with a fear I had never experienced before. The foolhardy bravery of our actions only now revealed itself to me. There was no guarantee this would work as planned. I looked across at Alchemist Prime and saw his grim face full written with thoughts much like my own. It was out of our hands now, and we could do nothing but wait, and hope. We burned out our retinal cores, but nothing met our gaze except the blistering intensity of the light, and alive or dead, they were gone now into the brilliance of the Energon Singularity.

The body of Primus stirred beneath us, an uneasy rumbling like the movement of mountains stirring in their beds. It went on a few cycles, and the ground became more agitated, in bursts, as if each effort caused a newer, greater recoil. Ripples, like sound in water, moved through the planet then—a terrifying and unnatural event to happen to a thing of such massive, metal immobility—everything that had been solid flowing as if it were a liquid. The rim of the Well warped and twisted. Whatever grand thoughts we had had a moment before were swept away as we reeled and struggled to stand. Within moments a convulsion ripped up through the Well accompanied by a massive burst of luminous gas, hot as a star core. We were flung into the air by the force of the blast, helpless. For a moment it seemed as if our hubris in attempting the plan was to be repaid with violent death, but then we struck the ground with shattering force and in pain found ourselves all too alive.

Blind and broken, we shouted to one another, to any other Prime who might hear us. The world moved like an ocean. Rocks and fragments struck us both, rushing past us, and it became apparent even to our ruined senses that there could only be one cause for this—we had landed on the edge of the Well where it was now twisting in the throes of colossal forces coming from within the core of the world: we were on a steep slope that might at any moment become vertical, and we were sliding down at a terrific rate into the Well itself.

Groping around for any purchase, I found the foot of Alchemist Prime and gripped it, as if he could save me, though he was in the same position as I was. A huge upwelling of heat and gas surged past us. Everything seemed to slow, and the pain of our bodies expanding made it nearly impossible to move or to think. Then there was a jolt, and our descent stopped. Hooks and lines caught us and within moments our fall had become a wrenching rise, nearly as alarming. I heard the distant, static-confused bursting of talk, which became the voices of Prima and Vector, screaming over the din of the world's agonies. Slowly but surely, they winched us back to the surface, struggling until they had dragged us, if not to safety, at least to a distance away from the snarling mouth of the Well.

I felt Prima beating my back with his colossal fists. "What have we done! What have we done?"

I could not answer for the gas and heat had left me in shock, but his questions were answered shortly afterward. The heaving and shuddering stopped, and a blissful peace descended, in which we all gathered our wits, braced for aftershocks and further surprises, though nothing could have prepared us for what happened next.

The mouth of the Well narrowed, and the light coming from it became focused, arrowing upward into the star-spangled vastness overhead. The beam became no wider than my hand, then no wider than my finger. Its frequency shifted.

"What *is* that?"

But none of us could answer Amalgamous's question. As one, we all attempted to follow the light's direction, to see what lay at the end. Alchemist had the better eyes, able to shift into distances the rest of us could only perceive in radio. Cycles passed, and we took advantage of the calm to regroup while Alchemist stared skyward and the beam shone on, thin as a fiber, so intense it would have passed through or vaporized any solid object.

Finally, after we had reached a safe distance, as we could guess it, Alchemist said, "It reaches the Universal Rim. I . . . I believe it is the gaze of the Triptych Mask and it looks into the recorded information of all living beings in the search for patterns it may use to create life. It will create the new beings from this information."

"Beings like us?"

"Certainly, but how much I cannot say. Beam is transmitting information. . . ." Alchemist said. His voice trailed off into a musing tone. For a few cycles more things continued. Then Prima opened his mouth to speak, but at that second the beam suddenly shut off, and we were plunged into an unexpected dimness until our lenses adjusted.

In the shadows, the Well opened out, its steep sides becoming shallow and wide. There was a volley of sparkling glimmers, like firelight seen against the walls of a cave—we caught their reflections only. Then movement, a shimmer of fire becoming a sudden outpouring rush of shapes in silhouette. They dashed outward in all directions from the center of the Well. Skittering, dancing, prancing, running, slithering, fluttering, wriggling—a wave of living machines of every imaginable size and proportion hurtled onto the barren surface of Cybertron. We could only watch in stunned awe as some crossed the distance to the rocky outcropping where we had taken small shelter. There the wave broke around us, swarmed over us—tiny machines no bigger than a rivet, larger ones up to the size of an arm or leg—and then they passed on, covering the land, filling the air, scattering into the distance according to some strange universal plan that sent them busily toward their individual destinies. They never paused to give us a thought.

The deluge of new forms continued in this manner for many days. At first I attempted to make a log of the many forms and their varieties, but it soon became a ridiculous enterprise—by the third day, larger creatures began to appear, and then Prima called me over to witness something he was eager to point to me—among the shambling and jogging shapes now emerging more slowly from the Well's mouth came bipedal forms like ourselves. Not too many, but some. And at the head of them, slowly pacing forward with an expression of surprise and wonder, came the figure we thought we would never see and wondered if we would ever recognize.

I recognized him immediately, although he looked nothing like *Thirteen*—he was far smaller and simpler, an altogether unimposing bot of no particular outstanding feature other than the unique signature of his Spark. I looked into the *Covenant* pages in which all creations were listed and read his name there: Orion Pax.

I attuned myself to his frequencies so that I would be able to track him, but for now we only studied him. We watched until he had walked into the distance. Like all the others, though, he was biologically one of us in all the significant ways and possessed a T-cog, which they had all been given. He never altformed once but simply walked peaceably through the other creatures toward the rising ridges of what would become, in the far future, the Tagan Heights.

"Do you still think it wise to conceal the nature of the T-Cog?" I asked Prima as we watched Orion Pax walk out into his new world.

"For now," he said. "There is enough new to be ordered. Besides, they may discover it themselves. " He had always been one of those in two minds about its inclusion, suspecting it was too powerful an ability and could lead to trouble. "If there seems a need later, we can do it then."

On the final day of the genesis, the largest creatures we had yet seen emerged from the Well. It had dimmed, and the fervent rush had slowed to a trickle of new forms. We felt instinctively that the act of creation was nearing its end. Then three creatures emerged one after the other.

We had taken up a post several hundred metrons from the Well core, judging it a safe point from which to make observations. However, each of us leaned backward automatically upon having our attention drawn to the Well's now-fitful eruptions of light. The flicker was caused by the blockage of the Well itself as the figure of an enormous beast heaved itself out of the hole and into the dawn's light. I quickly ascertained it was at least forty metrons from snout to tail and dwarfed anything we had so far witnessed.

It was a quadruped, with a sinuous body that extended into a long neck and longer tail. At first I thought the body was misshapen and warped, but after a few moments of freedom the mass around its center suddenly expanded into a colossal set of wings, which it awkwardly stretched and spread out to test the air. Its horned head and vicious claws gleamed. With an awkward lurch and a pounce, its first act was to leap upon the form of a slow-moving ground creature and tear it to bits. Tendrils around its jaws snaked about, consuming the victim's Energon in rapid pulses. Discarding the corpse with a shake of its grasping foot, the predator threw its head back and shrieked, steam and smoke pouring from its massive maw.

It was answered by a second, similar beast crawling from the Well's mouth, this one with two heads and necks. And then a third—wingless, but covered in fans of bladed vanes. Their piercing whistles and hoots cut across the slight sounds of the landscape like knives.

"Predacons," Prima said with finality, watching their primal, atavistic displays with detached interest. "Savages."

In fact he named them well. The first was the largest, the "Predaking," who never, as far as I know, went by another name. His followers were Lazerback and Twinstrike. They were the first of many whose sustenance was gained by hunting and killing others for their Energon, and their creation marked the conclusion of the Well's initial outpouring of life. Over the next millennia

they and their prey sculpted the surface of the world into a new and busy ecology.

Energon came in many forms and was relatively abundant as it leaked from Primus's core. It lay in the ground in crystalline form that could be mined, but also was refinable from liquid metal pools or from the gaseous eruptions and the pits of murky salts that dotted the landscape. There was no niche for its exploitation that was not thoroughly filled by one bot or another, and they in turn were prey or farm beasts for those who had no abilities to garner raw Energon for themselves. To replace the dead, the Well ejected more forms, more Sparks, and sometimes threw up fresh creations of its own.

Alchemist and I looked upon what we had wrought with wonder and confusion. To say that this was what we originally had in mind when we followed Primus's commands and the intuition of Optimus Prime would have been to give us far more imagination or conviction than we had had that solemn day when the Well was created. To say that we were pleased now would have given us a good deal more intuition and wisdom than we possessed. We were, of all things, humbled.

Far from us in the distance, orbiting the yellow star, buried in the planet into which he had collided, the body of Unicron accreted gas and rocks from the debris of its small system. We watched it now and again, but it showed no signs of waking. The sense of Spark within him was utterly gone, and over the millennia that followed, he became a footnote to our greater studies of the world developing around us, and the personalities and beings who came and went upon it.

We remnant Primes entered a time of growth and guardianship, wandering alone across the huge surface of our growing world and marking its changes and seasons, observing the rise and fall of small populations—we moved in the scale of Deep Time, stellar cycles our moments and millennia our hours. Orion Pax and his bipedal companions survived a variety of trials, and in their conversations developed the beginnings of a social, talkative culture that rose somewhat above the baseline cacophony of survival and self-interest that dominated the rest. Life slowly but surely prospered, and we lulled ourselves into the insensibility of ages without struggle. Even the strikes of meteors from the outer reaches of the system failed to do more than create brief pockets of crisis and opportunity. The *Covenant* grew lengthy and broad with description and analysis, coming to archive the development of a world from the dormant body of a Titan, Primus, to a planet rich in ecosystems whose surface altered bit by bit from trackless waste to organized, smoothed, and regulated regions of increasing efficiency and complexity. This was the Age of Evolution as it began.

Its end was not to be so wondrous.

THE CATACLYSM

The end came unforeseen, as most do, when the rotation of neighboring star systems temporarily brought the gravitational pull of a second star into conflict with our own. The results of the tug-of-war that ensued between our sun and the newcomer's swollen red mass were disastrous for the burgeoning life of Cybertron. The conflict pulled a large number of rocks and asteroids out of our system's Debris Cloud, which orbited our sun beyond the fifth planet.

Having spent all this time safely circling at a distance, invisible to Cybertronians and far from the minds of us remaining Primes, these large masses—in some cases hundreds of metrons long—came hurtling into the central system, and many of them collided with us. By the time we saw the trails and flares of their passage, it was far too late to do anything about most of them. Some were smashed into smaller shards by Prima and Vector, or blasted apart by Alchemist and Amalgamous, but we could not possibly manage them all. Inevitably, many of them slammed into the planet with megaton impacts that annihilated everything for thousands of metrons in all directions. They caused local sub-plane instabilities, tore up the ground with excessive local overheating, and generally melted and fused the surface into slag after propelling millions of tons of solid and liquid ejecta into the thin atmosphere. They plunged us into darkness and cold. For machine life this is not the devastation it would be for other creatures of different chemistry, but it was the second effect of the pass that proved the deadlier.

The pull of the dying star caused our own sun to erupt where it faced the gravitational demands of its antagonist. Plumes of fissioning nuclear material millions of miles long were torn from it and dragged across the path of Cybertron. Some were deflected by the shielding of our magnetosphere, but the greater ones quickly injected massive quantities of magnetic and particle energy right through it. Everything on the dayside of the planet was subjected to vast doses of radiation and severe electromagnetic spiking.

Many Cybertronian forms could not survive the shocks to which they were exposed. These died on the spot. Larger and more robust individuals were able to restart after short intervals of rest, but for many of them a worse fate awaited. The e-mag storms disrupted the internal signaling of their bodies and brains. Millions perished as they pursued erratic, destructive behaviors, mindless and out of control, smashing themselves to bits in mimicry of once-useful activities or simply attacking one another in violent frenzies of terror and madness.

It is still a matter of some shame to recollect the fate of the Primes. We only survived by taking shelter and assuming Stasis Mode, in which the majority of our internal activity is terminated to protect us while we become inert, awaiting a state of safety in which to awaken. Once we had determined the likely outcome of events and realized that against such indefatigable natural foes we had no chance, we went out and addressed as many of the new bots as we were able to, telling them they must bury themselves and hide far from the surface and initiate the process of voluntary hibernation. We demonstrated the Stasis Lock and asked them to gather and tell as many others as they could find. Some of the more able beastforms had already done this, the Lock a natural part of their methods for avoiding capture, but the bipedals, who would group up and fight off assaults, did not know they could do it. I saw Orion Pax in one such band and watched him herding others before him deep into tunnels they had used to store Energon. I could only pray that this location was not one of those that would be hit directly as I made my way to my own hiding place.

The cosmic pass did not take that long—in total it cannot have been more than a few thousand stellar cycles, which for a thing of that nature is mercifully short—but the devastation it wreaked was almost complete. By the

time it had concluded, all the largest lifeforms and the smallest had been eradicated. Those that survived were those that had been able to utilize caves or tunnels and burrow beneath the deadly surface under deposits of heavy metals, particularly lead, which had shielded them from the worst of the storms. When they emerged into the sudden silent dawn of the new era, they found themselves alone in a landscape littered with fused and mangled bodies, piled grotesquely into contorted masses that in other ages would have served as tombs to fallen heroes or epic commemorations of a great war. They walked among forests of the monumental dead, and in Cybertronian fashion, after a time of grief, they began the process of dismantling them and reforging them into more useful things. But that marked the onset of a fresh era, which would bring its own particular challenges and opportunities. This one had come to its tragic conclusion and bore its own dark, awful secrets of which the greatest to be instantly forgotten—because it went unwitnessed—was the fate of the Predacons.

TWILIGHT OF THE PREDACONS

The Predaking surveyed his world with the confidence of one who has plenty and who knows everything he needs to know in order to get whatever he wants. And why not? He was the largest and most powerful of all the Predacons, and there wasn't a moment that passed that he didn't feel full with the knowledge of it. However, it was wise to watch his fellows, among whom he detected the stirrings of ambition from time to time. There were many of them, and they had a knack, unlike most bots, of being able to gather together in temporary bonds to gain greater knowledge, greater insight, and greater awareness than they would have possessed alone. Greater madnesses and schemes too. The Predaking himself had fond memories of consuming pretenders to his dominion in the past, and of assimilating others whose features he had found useful additions or decoratively pleasing. The accumulation had only improved his capacities, and he had also had the foresight to cultivate two particular allies who granted him the favor of combination when he required it in exchange for favored hunting grounds and his protection against would-be usurpers.

It was his habit to greet the day with a review of all this deeply gratifying information and then to turn to the west and look for Lazerback and Twinstrike on the two rocky plinths that, together with his own, overlooked the entire span of the Plains of Iacon. They were, as always, in their positions, wings and sails fanned out to bask in the sun's first rays. Below them the day's fodder awaited, ignorant of its fate as it toiled among the rocks or in the sulfur grottoes, eking scraps of Energon for its lowlier existence.

To the Predaking's mind these creatures were lesser beings, and the manner of their lesserness was not a concern. He observed their differences with the detached interest of a collector and chose prey according to his mood and what sort of a chase and fight, if any, he could expect. He had learned only that there was a certain kind, a sort of miner, he thought, that he should avoid. This kind was a medium-sized, unprepossessing sort of bot that walked upright on two legs and had no distinguishing features of interest except a rudimentary blob head. They were pathetically easy to capture, but after the first uninspiring meal of one, he had been visited by a much

larger and angrier version of the same thing that carried with it a large, bladed stick.

This being had had the presumption to have a name of its own, as he did. It called itself Prima and had used the stick to dish out a good deal of pain to the Predaking over the course of their first couple of cycles of conversation. He could hardly believe that he was being given a beating by such an inferior being, but there was no denying it. This bot had a kind of Spark to it that the Predaking hadn't seen before, something that made it stronger, faster, more intelligent, and more, well, charismatic, than it had any right to be. There was just something about its energy that demanded respect and asserted the need for obedience. The Predaking despised the notion, but he was finally forced to admit that he had encountered a thing that was potentially as dominant as he was. He could be seriously injured or even killed if he took an unlucky turn in the fight. Fortunately the thing was open to reason, and what it wanted was of no consequence. In exchange for assuring him that the Predacons would be leaving the miner-bot-things alone, Prima said that he would cause the Predaking no more trouble. At first he had suspected a ruse, but it proved a being of its word. The Predaking had not seen it or one like it since then.

The day proved good. Once the sun was high and visibility at its best, the three Predacons scattered to patrol their territory. The strange red glow in the sky that had been growing over the last few months was particularly vivid. It had made the Predaking feel angry sometimes and upset at others when it refused to obey his will and go away. Now it cast a baleful eye, and to the right of it as he flew, he marked other bright shapes, with tails apparently, moving steadily across the sky. He had seen things like this a lot lately, streaking and burning up high overhead in shows of brilliance. At first they had frightened him, although he had struggled not to show this. Lately he had become offhand about them, considering them some weather feature. There was occasional light wind, but nothing of significance. It took a great deal of energy to fly for hunting and for the maintenance of correct boundaries between his lands and those of the others. He would have liked to push farther, but it was impractical unless he were to co-opt more Predacons to his little pack. For the time being, he saw none suited for the purpose.

Irritated by the lights, he leaped on an opportunistic locust bot as it toiled to farm a patch of Energon-rich deposits at the edges of one of the insecticons' vast agricultural spreads. Its fellows continued blithely to organize sediments of various kinds into ranks and chomped their way through the graded rocks to filter microscopic Energon particles from the residues. It was a region of low-lying valleys, and the insects had managed a great deal here. He tore the bot's head off with a swipe of his claw and felt pleased by their industrious works as he drained its Energon with his long tongue. He had won these farms from a vicious and unpredictable foe, Skystalker, and every time he harvested the results he gloated on his victory. In lean times these insecticons were reliable little snacks. Times were not lean . . . but they were still tasty. He tossed the body where others might find it, to remind them that there were greater masters about, and then launched himself back out on his patrol.

A few minutes later, the first meteor blazed down, faster than he had ever seen anything move before, and

buried itself in the lowlands just ahead of him. It was so quick and silent, he thought, startled into a flapping, awkward hover. Then a wall of air smacked him down out of the sky and flung him tumbling into the ground. At the same time a crack deafened him. He was dazed and lay for some time without being able to orient himself or move. Finally the shock wore off and he quickly gathered himself, discovering that he had sustained relatively minor damage. The air and the land around him were teeming with scurrying, panicking smaller bots, all rushing away from the site of the impact in blind terror. He smelled smoke and fire, sulfur and the telltale oxidation of some serious burning metal. Pride drew him to his full height and turned him to face the danger. Let these puny bots flee! He would know and better this enemy before another hour had passed. These things were not allowed to happen to his land or his creatures.

He flew to the disaster site cautiously, glad the others were not there to witness his expressions as he saw the unnatural ripples fused into the glassy rocks that now glowed and cooled in the aftermath. The plume of ash, dust, and micrometal that had been thrown up was still mushrooming high above him when he felt his surface begin to burn unpleasantly, and not only with the heat from below. Larger pebbles and bits of dirt started to rain down on him in a steady patter as he turned aside. There was nothing alive down there in any case. Farther out, the broken and smoldering bodies of various unlucky creatures littered the ground. He signaled Lazerback and Twinstrike for a recon, but they had seen the event and were already making their way to him.

He moved off, trying to seem leisurely. He felt fear, and its uncommon bite made him angry. When the second, third, and fourth impacts dropped out of the sky in quick succession, all within visible distance, his hackles went up, and his body charged itself into fight mode though he could do nothing but witness the same awful results and think himself lucky they'd not fallen on his head. What was going on? He screamed his defiance and rage, steam belching from his whistles and pipes, fire roaring from his jaws to match the fires that now lit the landscape. In the aftermath of his bellow, he heard the shrieking jabber and screams of mass terror, but he knew it was not for him. Bots stumbled and flew into him without caring or even noticing that he was anything other than a minor hill in their way. They struck him from various directions, not knowing which way to flee, though flee they must.

Twinstrike arrived first, landing on an exhausted beastbot that had knocked itself out crashing into the Predaking's side. He casually ate its flickering Energon before coughing out a ton of dust and filth from his vents. His eyes blazed, and in their moment of fury he and Lazerback challenged each other, snarled and bit, before sense returned. Lazerback snorted superheated steam and growled, "Enough fooling. What's all this?"

I note for the sake of completion here that it has been suggested in other, unofficial records, that the Predacons could not speak. Of course they could. The confusion over this arose from the fact that, for the most part, Predacons were never heard to speak by anyone who lived to tell the tale.

"No idea." Twinstrike shook one head, cowering in a display to try lessening Lazerback's aggression although he struggled against his own need to run. The other head looked up, scanning. "More are coming. I see their trails burn fires against the stars. Backlash is dead, lump

of iron. Fangblade all broke up, won't last the day out. Everywhere everything dead."

The Predaking stabbed a claw upward at the red star, making allowances for Twinstrike's natural need to exaggerate. Things were bad, but everything was clearly not dead. "Think it is that thing?"

Twinstrike shook his speaking head, still staring with the other. "Whatever it is, we can't reach it. Too far away."

Lazerback coughed, looking around at the gritty air with hatred. "The sky is falling!" He sounded personally hurt by the idea.

"Don't you have anything to state but the obvious?" the Predaking demanded, aware that he was not going to get any answers now, and bitterly resenting it. He lashed his tail, smashing rocks.

"We're lucky to be alive . . . uhh . . . no," Lazerback said, thinking it over. "What should we do?"

At this point the Predaking had no answer. As Predaking, however, he must take command. Their silence must not be left to slowly erode his power, but as he stood there in the midst of the chaos nothing came to mind. Finally he said, "We must guard the territories and do what we can to herd the fodder into safer areas." Even to himself he sounded doubtful. He did not even know what a safer area might be. But the others were too grateful for a sense of purpose to bother challenging his authority now. "We will take over Darksteel's sweep and when Skylynx is dead, his too. That will make up for our losses."

And so for the days of death from above, that is what they did. Gradually the light dimmed, and the temperatures dropped. Flying was difficult for more than a few hours a day thanks to the pollution in the atmosphere, and the random nature of fresh meteor strikes left their nerves ragged and their tempers short. Grim determination was all that kept them alert each day, until, against all hopes, matters changed for the worse.

The sun itself reached out one day and breathed fire upon them. At first it was brighter, and the Predaking wondered if things were returning to normal, but then he caught sight of patches of fine dust high in the air beginning to ignite with bursts of orange and yellow. Strange lights flickered in huge veils across the sky; all colors they were, and pretty, so that he watched them for a good few cycles, entranced, and only later, as he felt the rising heat and a strange prickling in his body did he begin to wonder if this was more than a show.

The others were soon at his side.

"Words from the East say everything's burning," Lazerback reported. "Shrikebots flying told me it. They the fastest flying bots. Came from far far away, chasing the night. Said need deep dark places. Cold places. Can't find."

Twinstrike shook his heads. "All signaling has gone. White noise. Static. Silence. I don't hear or see well. I can't clear my optics."

The Predaking had never hid from anything in his life. He wouldn't have stepped on a Predacon who had. For the first time he considered it, however, because it was only a little past dawn, but the temperature was climbing rapidly. If it continued, he knew that in a few cycles' time the expansion of his body and its overheating would give him serious problems. His extremities would begin to melt. It did not bear thinking about. The alternative was also equally beyond contemplation: to abandon the

territories and flee like ratbots, offering no resistance, no statement of command.

"You're proud," Twinstrike said. "But you're not an idiot. If those Shrikebots are flying westward, we should too."

Lazerback looked at the high fires, the beautiful, iridescent fluttering of the sky. "How can something so bad look so good?"

The Predaking stretched out and turned to Twinstrike's observing head. "What is that exactly?"

Twinstrike's other head swung around to look at him. "As far as I can tell the solar storm is stripping away the magnetic shield. Electromagnetic catastrophes are not far away."

"Meaning?" Lazerback asked.

"Meaning we could be killed and never see it coming," the Predaking said, resigned already to the only solution he could see. He did not bother to wonder who had sent this doom or why. It wasn't important. "Predacons—to the air. We fly into the Night. It is safer in the dark."

"What about the border patrols and the food?" Lazerback asked.

"We feed on the way; we'll return when this is over." The Predaking felt fresh confidence upon saying this, as if it were nearly already true. He spread his wings and leaped into flight. At least the extra heat was helpful in this, if nothing else.

The others followed him in V-formation. He headed west as fast as he was able. After a few cycles, he had to slow the pace because it was exhausting. They paused to hunt and renew their Energon supplies and then continued. Eventually, after a great effort, they passed into darkness again, but he began to realize as the cycles passed that they could not keep this up indefinitely. They searched for caverns, but their routes did not take them over areas with anything more than shallow surface shelters, and none large enough for all of them.

By the time two days had passed, the Predaking knew they were doomed. The prickle in his body had become a maddening buzz that never stopped. There were not enough living bots on the surface to eat, and he was weak. He could not keep up the speed, and the sun was only moments away. He landed and waited for it to overtake him. As the light intensified he saw that their journey had taken them close to a crevassed region where the metallic rocks had been blasted into fractured gorges by some of the meteor impacts. He pointed them out to the others. Heat swept across them as the line of dawn crept relentlessly, blindingly, from tails to heads. The buzzing became a shriek on the ends of his nerves. He saw, in disbelief, Lazerback charging to attack him suddenly, either through starvation or madness. Twinstrike a moment later did the same, but lunged with each head in a different direction.

What came next were flashes of lucidity in which he felt them all three joined in mortal combat, and long periods of oblivion from which he woke in greater pains, heat, and sickness. He thought it was the sun—so hot, so intense, the radiation burning, the electric disruption unbearable . . . but they could not fly out of the day now, and the feeble dust clouds were ineffective at shading them. He saw the end of the Predacons, in this ridiculous, mad fight against the stars and each other, and marveled that it could come so suddenly and out of nowhere. He called, without hope, to Onyx Prime, the Lord of Beasts, who was a distant myth but the only

figure he could think of greater than himself who might have mercy on them. There was no answer, of course, but the thought triggered a memory of a deeper ability that certain beastbots had, and which the Predacons still possessed.

Staggering from the impacts of Lazerback's tasers and Twinstrike's burning breath, he found the strength to arm himself and deliver a weapon blast that was all his own. It took a few shots and a few misses but eventually he managed to land the frequency beam on the others' heads. Their bodies obeyed an ancient signal and slowed to a crawl, then lay, then slept the slumber of the dead winter: the Stasis Lock. The Predaking observed his work, his broken friends, and then took hold of them by the tails and with all his remaining strength began to drag them toward the region of ruined ground.

The cycles blurred into one long, hot, shrieking nightmare. One by one, he tumbled them into the deep gorges and searched for caves. There was a way into the planet, several of them—large enough. At least there was shade from the spine-melting heat. He worked, rested, worked again, dragging and dragging until finally he had brought them to a dark cavern, hundreds of metrons beneath the surface, far from anywhere he had ever known. Now only a fresh influx of pure Energon would wake them, and he had no hopes of that coming, yet he still could not bring himself to be their end. No, it was not right that a Predacon should die in pathetic darkness and shame. Better they lie dormant forever than be extinguished like vermin in their holes.

Opposite: The Predacons turn on one another amid the fury of the Cataclysm

He set his internal timer to trigger Stasis Lock in a few cycles, randomized so that he would not see it coming. He waited, listening to the planet groan at the sun's brutal treatments, and for a little time he wondered what it was all for, and thought his struggles and his prowess strange things that he had never considered brief gifts until now.

His head clattered to the floor of the cavern. That was the last noise that he made, or any of them. Above and beyond the millennia turned, though they were not marked, and so were not even forgotten.

The *Covenant* knew of their fates, however, so it is recorded here, though there is no record of where they are, if they still survive. The planet's surface changed a great deal in the few years that followed.

Once the pass of the dying star was over, it left Cybertron much altered from its previous state. There were far fewer Transformers of any kind, although the small- and medium-sized beings were spared the worst of the cataclysm and emerged from their hiding places with relative ease. They went back to their business, refining and grading metal, searching out Energon, and building mindless machineries that could speed their efforts. Within a few hundred stellar cycles, the barren, rocky surface, with its glass-lined pits and deserts of broken stone, was made over into organized structures, smoothed trackways, and regular accumulated buildings of various metals. Large areas remained uninhabited, marked only by the strange slagheaps of the ancient dead, blown over by the dust storms, but between these arid regions, the first signs of civilization began, against the odds, to prosper.

THE AGE OF ORIGINS

The terraforming of Cybertron continued as the events of the Cataclysm slowly faded into the past. As Transformers were created, their number gradually began to replace the losses they had suffered, though they never reached the same population that had gone before them, and some varieties of life were lost altogether. Yet new ones also appeared from time to time and added to the industry that slowly altered a rocky, metallic wasteland into a place of pattern, form, and purpose.

It is difficult to accurately document the scope of this era in an annotated form, for many things arose and fell and rose again at diverse points across the globe. Bots gathered in organized groups for the first time, with an alert sense of purpose that this brush with their own mortality had offered them. They made plans and schemes for all kinds of things, some brutal and self-interested, others thoughtful and contemplative. But the most significant of the early developments was the ascent of the Patterners.

They began as a group of friends who had been brought into close harmony through the hardships of the Cataclysm. During the terror and the time of their hiding, they had come to question one another deeply about the meaning of what had happened to their world; where had this catastrophe come from, why had it chosen them, what were they to do about it? They pondered the idea of greater beings, whose wrath it might be, but also considered the nature of the universe as they understood it. One among them had made a particular study of the skies. Her name was Azimuth, and a lifetime's obsession enabled her to reveal that she was nearly certain such things were impersonal and accidental. While bots schemed and planned for their own interests, the same could not be said for mindless objects, no matter how large or menacing they might seem. She saw nothing in the stars but an elegant, mathematical motion, of a pattern that might be seen and drawn in advance. The vast stellar bodies had a harmony of silent relativity that showed only an adherence to strict rules of logic—the necessity of mass and energy in motion—and nothing more.

The others were convinced by Azimuth's explanations, and when they could return to the surface, they made it their purpose to inscribe upon the skin of their world a great map of the heavens, charted for them with the aid of Perceptor and Reflector, whose exceptional optics allowed them the most accurate sights. This gigantic map the world walked on would serve to warn them of future dangers, would mark the survival of their intelligence in a truly lasting fashion. To make the scale sufficiently worthy of such a venture, they chose the nearest large impact crater—which now marked the ground with perfect, frozen concentric rings of breccias—to represent the orbit of Cybertron about its star. Over the next twenty stellar cycles, they carved their circle and marked it up in silver metal, then progressed to the paths of other bodies.

Such was the success of the notion that it wasn't only stars and galaxies they wrote into the world's skin, but their calculations about the passage of time, the nature of

Opposite: Cybertron, carved and built with the symbols of the Patterners

the elements, and the structure of the largest and smallest of things, until from a distance Cybertron looked like a carved and spangled object, a bauble that glittered and shone with mystic lines and dramatic patterns, forever unmistakable as a place made by intelligent minds.

The Patterners developed in synchrony with other intellectual groups devoted to engineering and reclamation, with builders and with burrowers, all dedicated to some form of Energon harvest or the construction of practical buildings for medical and technical development, and for the amassing and study of knowledge—fueled by the fear of another Cataclysm and what it could rob them of.

At the same time there was a rise in the mystical and spiritual appreciations of themselves and their past. The Cataclysm's electromagnetic storms had played havoc with the memories of many who survived, erasing what had once been accepted fact—for example, concerning the existence of the Primes—and replacing it with fractured visions and snippets of information that no longer added up to a coherent whole. Legends replaced history, with imagination filling in what was lacking, and the enduring Primes who walked among the rest did nothing to correct the development of these tales, feeling it fit that they should vanish into obsolescence and not overshadow the creation of a new age. They saw that the remaining artefacts were buried or hidden, disguised or dismantled and put away, and spread a degree of disinformation about what they were and what they were capable of. The fragile ecosystems of civilization forging themselves on Cybertron would not withstand the discovery of a weapon like the Requiem Blaster, that could easily fall into the hands of a minor warlord and be the ruin and ending of so much.

I see now a degree of duplicitousness in my cover-up of the past, which was well-intentioned, as stated here, but which in fact said more about our guilt at allowing the loss of Solus Prime than anything about our magnanimous spirit in wishing new generations peace. We remembered all too clearly the horror of what we had done and not done and could not forget the sadness of Solus Prime in forging the most destructive of

Above: Perceptor, a leader among the Patterners

the artefacts against her better judgment, knowing as she did what they would be used for. With them, we sought to bury our grief and shame. For a long time we succeeded, though in our hearts it was harder to dig and cover over, and so we remained silent and let others take that silence for wisdom.

Similarly, the identities of the Primes were allowed to blur until I myself, Alpha Trion, walked alongside other bots only marked out by size and the strange weight of my words, and not by any suspicion I was of the original Thirteen, made by Primus, who by now was considered likely a myth to make the planet sound grander and more important than it was. Only the Well of All Sparks remained a universal point of reverence beyond debate, producing bots at a steady rate and remaining resolutely unaffected by any direct appeals, prayers, sacrifices, or other such attempts at influence.

Patterner states spread relentlessly, since order and form pleases bots nearly universally. Even the warlords and roving bands of barbarians who periodically wiped out pockets of activity had a respect for the structures that were built, and used tracks and roads, buildings and burrows as readily as any other bots, living in them and pillaging them until they broke or ran out of Energon, before moving on. They never destroyed Patterner markings, and to modern times structures are still built according to the ordered calculation of Pattern meaning, so as not to upset the workings of the gigantic calculation engine that Cybertron's surface had become. They feared those who understood the blueprints most of all, and these bots were often made holy figures, followed and considered valuable over others. The memory of the price of ignorance—fire and brimstone—remained vivid for many ages.

IACON BEGINS

One place above all became a repository of knowledge and learning, a retreat filled with records and dedicated to the study of the universe. This was Iacon, and its reputation soon spread, drawing the intellectual and intelligent toward itself like a magnet. Along with them came builders and creators, and in their wake, the necessary miners, refiners, and constructors who shared common visions of developing greater organization, efficiency, and above all, the progress of ideas.

Within a few hundred stellar cycles, the landscape there had become a great network of interlinked buildings and deep warrens housing laboratories, workshops, and libraries. Scholars and inventors gathered together. It was unique in the world, although copied across the globe, and an unprecedented level of innovation and thought led to the inauguration of many other sites that would become iconic down the ages—the Tagan Heights in particular, where the refineries and forges flickered with the light of creation day and night. Thus this region of Cybertron became its virtual capital, and all roads in one way or another led there. Naturally, I traveled there also, and inaugurated the greater Hall of Records and Archives, though the *Covenant* remained unique to me, both in reading and in writing.

Beyond the center, barbarian struggles often dominated local culture in petty fights over resources or personal rivalries. Peaceful communities struggled to survive, although they too had their champions, among them a particular band of ferocious warriors known as the Wreckers, who took it upon themselves to guard the most vulnerable clusters of civilization from the depredations of fast-striking packs such as the Vandals, the

Breakers, and the Razers. *(Among the original Wreckers were bots still alive today, notably Wheeljack and Bulkhead. It was also at this point that Orion Pax came to Iacon and began to study the written forms of Cybertronian, settling with relief into a time of his life where he could think and relax without the ever-pressing needs of survival. I saw to it that he met bots who were helpful to him, including those who would allow him to meet and work with Vector Sigma—all as preparation for my plans to create a position for him in the Hall of Records, though I didn't offer it yet. He needed time to acclimate to civilization.)*

At the outermost limits, the remaining insecticons and other beastlike bots roved and lived wild in their own ways, though as time went on, they were pushed back and back into the badlands and the deserts. Meantime the Well spilled less of them and more of those with names of their own, bots of identity and purpose.

Among these was Ratchet, whom many of you will already have heard of, though it will surprise you to learn perhaps that Ratchet is a very old bot, who came walking to Iacon across half the world, every step a pilgrimage from the primitive village of his origins to the citadel of self-improvement that he longed to find in Iacon. And find it he did, for there was not a single arena of knowledge that was not already in development there. He came directly to the medical units and applied to be taken on as a student under the then-chief of surgery, Remedy. Thus he learned his trade, right from the infancy of science on our world, and took part in its development to the refined and exacting discipline that it is today.

Above: Ratchet, who came to Iacon to study the science of medicine

As Iacon grew to prominence, other movements swept the world in waves of notions that passed from head to head via chatter and comms and all the usual channels. Patterner mysticism took several paths and became in some places like a cult, dedicated to the worship of sacred numbers and geometries. At other places it became more like a social club, with rituals of celebrations and commemoration of the Cataclysm. Needless to say, the diverse groups had no time for one another's ideas of the correct life, and one splinter faction declared themselves

entirely Random and went about trying to erase all kinds of order in favor of establishing the "natural safety of the truly chaotic." They were led in this effort by Galvatron—a being whom Azimuth entirely despised as her living antithesis. For a short while they undid a lot of good work, but they died out within a mercifully short time as a result of attempting to remodel themselves with radioactive heavy elements, which were the only known substances to emit quantum particles at genuinely random intervals. Galvatron himself, having encouraged his followers to their deaths, survived with only mild poisoning and retired for a time, until he found a less-lethal doctrine, albeit peddling the same notions.

In time, the Patterner devotion became routinely integrated into other things, and its tenets and credos were slowly lost in the noise of later theories and interests, all of which used the basic format, none of which revered it in its unique way again.

Trade kings and queens flourished too, creating little towns of their own industries and exchanging goods and services, employing guards, and bossing lesser hamlets into obedience. Protection rackets raced like a wildfire across the world and the less creative traders turned to organized crime cartels. There were some large regional conflicts occasionally, and migrations that became colonizations, and plenty of minor skirmishes, but Iacon and its province were too heavily invested in and fortified to be threatened by these minor rabbles.

In a state of healthy growth but yet some great degree of ignorance about the state of the larger universe, Cybertron spun toward unity and genuine greatness, oblivious of the fact that it was not the only life in the galaxy. Far from being alone or unnoticed, it was looked upon with interest and speculation by alien eyes from a culture much more advanced than its own.

They bided their time, planning, scheming perhaps. They monitored communications, which the Cybertronians had no idea spilled out carelessly into the void all around them. They listened and learned to speak, and then to tell the Cybertronians' stories. They sent scout ships, in stealth, hidden in the dark energy fields of which they were the masters. . . .

HARBINGER

There was a commotion in the corridor outside the Forensics lab that broke Ratchet's concentration on the microscopic lines on his sample. He looked up crossly and roared at a junior intern, "What's going on? Tell them to pipe down!"

The intern dashed out but did not return, nor did the noise lessen. Ratchet stumped out of his room to discover the cause. A bot was being half dragged and half carried along toward the assessment ward, fighting all the way against restraints and the efforts of his bearers.

"I am *not* insane!" the voice of the patient shrieked.

Ratchet heard someone apply a control shock rod to the patient, felt the vibration of it in the floor as he rounded the corner. The patient calmed down helplessly into a muted mumble.

"What's this?" Ratchet demanded.

"He says he's been abducted by aliens," Crankhandle, a junior nurse, said, his voice buzzing with excitement.

Ratchet scowled and looked around for the attending doctor without success until he realized it would have to be him—he was the most senior medical officer present.

"All of you out; let's see what we have here. Crank, let's have some lights and make a proper assessment."

The authority in his tone had the friends and porters rushing outside. Crankhandle closed the door with a few reassurances to the attendees and then shut out their jabbering.

The patient slumped in place on the examining table, cowering, Ratchet thought.

"What's your name, bot?" He approached cautiously. He knew that insanity was rare in Cybertronians, but when it struck, for whatever reason, it could have violent results.

"Coldwelder," the bot said meekly, looking at Ratchet. He turned his head, and Ratchet saw the injuries inflicted on him were severe—pieces of plate were missing, and an eye hung from its socketing.

"Easy there, gonna fix you up," Ratchet said automatically, glancing down at the bot's hands as he began to realize with horror that the wounds he was seeing were self-inflicted. "What happened to you?" Without thinking, he went to the room's stored medical kit and started to prep for surgery. Crankhandle hovered in the background, listening, nervy.

"I'm from out in the Sea of Ages, yeah? Just rigging some nice gantries and that for the Rockgrinder Cartel, like, good pay and good times. Got a nice little Energon seam there. Well, I was out on my own on this ridge . . . setting up the rock face. It's all canyons. Loose ground. And I heard this noise and I was 'Oh wait, what's this?' I thought it was, you know, the Razers or something coming to steal all the rig." Coldwelder paused, seeing Ratchet come and stand over him. He twitched constantly, arms jigging, and pawed at his head.

Ratchet commanded Crankhandle to come and hold him still. "Go on, son."

Coldwelder trembled. "But it wasn't. It was this thing in the air, a black blob of metal, with rotating bands of light around it. I was scared, so I dropped my gear and I ran. I never saw nothing like it." He shivered as Ratchet used a sonic mapper to probe the depth of his damage. "They sucked me right into it with some magnetic clamp thing on my leg. Then they shot something into my head. Next thing I knew, I woke up on the roadway near here. . . . There's a thing in my head, Mister. A thing . . . Can you see it?"

Crankhandle struggled to see the readout on Ratchet's instrument, but he turned away, studying the results, astonished because Coldwelder was right, wondering what to say for the best. He looked up at Crank, "Go out to Dr. Cogwheel and ask for a long stand. Tell her Ratchet sent you, and she's to get over here in fifteen cycles for a second opinion."

"A long stand?" Crankhandle had never heard of such an instrument.

"Yeah, she'll give it right to you," Ratchet said. "It's urgent."

Puzzled, Crankhandle left. Ratchet closed the door after him and locked it. He turned back to the shivering form of Coldwelder. "You're right, son. But don't worry. I've got it under control. Ten cycles and I'll be fixing you right back up, good as new." The young damaged bot looked at him with such confidence and hope Ratchet had to suppress a nervous smile, instead nodding at him.

"You're the first person to believe me," Coldwelder said, voice fading as Ratchet applied an interrupter

Opposite: Ratchet pulls an organism out of the head of Coldwelder

anesthetic to allow him to work without causing pain. He sounded so grateful; Ratchet hoped he had reason to be.

Ratchet pulled over his tools and got to work. At least he didn't have to worry about Crankhandle coming back to annoy him. He'd be waiting in Cogwheel's surgery, standing in the corner, for a long time. . . .

A few cycles later and Ratchet was holding something in his tongs that he'd never seen the likes of before. It was a living mechanism, made of metal, but of no kind of machinery he'd known. Even the composition of it was odd. So much Iridium—an offworld metal. For all that it had been placed carelessly inside poor Coldwelder's skull, just attached to the plate, and seemed to have no connections to any important parts of him. But Ratchet felt grim and suspicious. He wanted to smash the thing on instinct, but that would prevent further diagnosis. Instead he searched for a safe method of storing it but was forced to place it in a specimen tray and lid that with a second tray, since there was nothing else.

He busied himself with repairing Coldwelder until Cogwheel arrived, exactly at the mark he had set for her. She slipped in the door, a slender, multi-armed bot who was somehow of Arachnicon stock, all delicate probes and exacting, fine limbs. Her precision and finesse were unparalleled, making her perfect for all kinds of micro-surgical procedures, and her ability to spin meshsteel webbing and use multiple limbs at once meant she was invaluable as a wound dresser.

She cleaned herself at the autoclave station and hurried over, silently assisting with her usual skill until they were done. Only a few more cycles had passed. Ratchet knew Coldwelder would stay under a little longer. He finally had to meet Cogwheel's curious eight eyes.

"I got a thing here needs some analysis," he said. "Guess you heard the rumor?" He collected the specimen tray and handed it over to her—with relief, if he was going to be honest about it.

She nodded and removed the lid. Finally she put the lid back and looked up at Ratchet. "It occurs to me that we have no central organization, no leader who could stand for our entire world. We have only the scholars of Iacon, the engineers of the Heights, and about a thousand minor kings, warlords, and traders, none of whom can see beyond attempting to get one over on the others."

Ratchet gaped for a moment, catching up her train of thought slowly, like an old chugging locomotive. She was saying that whatever this thing was, Coldwelder's hysteria was based in a truth. It was from another world, and that world had used him cruelly. "What should we do?"

"Well." Cogwheel's small body made tiny chattering noises in rapid successions, rills and runs of minuscule gears moving in synchronization as she thought. "We are doctors. Our duty is to save our patients and to try to prevent the spread of malicious afflictions. Does this count as a malicious affliction?"

"I don't know," Ratchet said. "I don't know what it does. But someone put it there against his will."

"Of course we ought to tell someone," Cogwheel said. "The question is, who? And what will they do?"

"Shouldn't we analyze that first?"

"I will begin work immediately, with your permission. It is your patient, after all. And your discovery."

Ratchet held his hands out, pushing the thing away. "Be my guest!" He had a bad feeling now. A very bad feeling. But he was still a junior medic, and the responsibility of doing the work felt like it was too much for him.

His other side, the scientist, burned with curiosity. "Maybe I can drop in and observe?"

"Do so," Cogwheel said. She took the trays with her. "I will let Crankhandle return, in a little while." She smiled wryly and slipped out.

Ratchet felt bad. Like he'd just passed the oilcan. He tidied and cleaned the instruments while he waited for Coldwelder to come around, so he could tell him the good news. And then tell him the bad news—that really, for the sake of not causing hysteria, which would count as a malicious affliction for sure, he'd have to shut up about what had gone on. Selling him the necessity of that was going to be far harder than fixing his head had been. . . .

THE QUINTESSONS

In fact, the discovery of the alien tracking and spying device went unreported for a while; the technology being so hard to retro engineer that Ratchet and Cogwheel didn't discover what it was doing, only that it was doing something, and it was alien. As a result of the information coming to Iacon, I realized that Cogwheel's fears were right. What Cybertron lacked was a Prime to lead it, organize it, and inspire it. If this odd contact proved more than a passing interest from elsewhere, Cybertron would be vulnerable without a rallying point. I began to seed the notion in various worthwhile heads that it might be time to develop ourselves an overarching, greater identity. Obviously, Orion Pax was in the back of my mind, but I said nothing of that yet.

However, my efforts, although they proved fruitful and progressed as well as could be hoped, were eclipsed by the arrival of the Quintessons.

Now, of course, we say it was an invasion. But at the time it did not seem like that. It is painful to recall how our naïveté and our longing for all that they said to be true played right into their hands. Even I, a Prime by nature, who ought to have known better, soon forgot the manner of their first observations and Coldwelder's experience, and believed wholeheartedly in the truth of their grandiose claims. We had not developed our own priesthoods. We did not understand that in believing others' stories we put ourselves entirely in their power. At least, we did not understand those things in the beginning.

They descended from the sky in craft of their own making; slender, elegant vehicles powered by fusion reactors. They looked like us, uncannily so, but smaller and more refined, as though the machineries that ran them were of an infinitely superior crafting. Their metallic bodies were silvery and filled with light, effulgent in a way that made them seem not only from another world but blessed by gods or other numinous beings of enormous grace and beauty. Even the heaviest of them, to our eyes, was of advanced design and this on its own, before they spoke a single word, put us in a state of awe.

I realized only a lot later that they were, of course, the offspring of Quintus's efforts, and must have been created by the actions of the Emberstone, although I suspected they were efforts he had abandoned, since any trace of him or his influence was long gone by the time they arrived on Cybertron.

They appeared all over the globe, all at once, at every significant outpost that we had. In some places they were opposed with force, but mostly they were met with awe and surprise. The attacks, to the last one, proved quite futile. They deflected missiles, debris, even beam

weapons, with casual, easy grace. There was no attempt at return fire. Our various greetings were discarded as of no consequence. This too made us pause and consider our relative value.

At Iacon, I was with the others of the Hall of Records when we dashed into the courtyard to see what was coming. A ray of light surrounded the craft as it floated down, vertically, without apparent means of propulsion. We could see others, at the Tagan Heights and down across the plains. They made landfall in silence, unified to a single cycle, and as one they stepped out and revealed their forms, unmistakably like our own. They spoke with one voice, in Cybertronian, and only the most intelligent of us ever wondered why.

"Beings of Cybertron, we come in peace. Please lay down your weapons and listen."

You could have heard a screw drop. Into this bated silence their voices fell like high-grade oil, slick and smooth and golden with promise. "We have been sent as emissaries of the Quintessons, a race of machines like you, to announce that your achievements have drawn you to the attention of the Universe's highest powers."

I would have paid to see the face of any of the Thirteen, and to read in it my own deep misgivings, but none were present, nor likely to be. I had to keep counsel and wait.

"Far from being the only life in the galaxy, you are one race of many. You are unique, however, in that you have been chosen to be elevated to the next rank in the grand scheme of powers, a step toward ultimate Transcendence."

Opposite: Quintessons arrive in their ships
Following: Cybertron opens to the Quintessons

So began their pitch, and it did not end until stellar cycles later, when they had demonstrated their skills and knowledge to great extent, the culmination being the moment that they dropped their most devastating revelation, one which seemed to put the truth into every other word they had uttered in a manner that went beyond all question, that gave it the ironclad ring of destiny.

They knew, somehow, about the T-Cog. They knew that every bot on Cybertron had an ability that had so far gone unsuspected, undiscovered: the ability to change form, and not only to change, but also to tailor that change into any desirable shape. Now the Primes' decision not to advertise it looked like a terrible misjudgment. My reticence, my hopes, had never included the possibility of intervention by others.

"Behold! As a token of welcome to the higher dimensions we gift you with a remarkable, godlike ability. . . ."

Yes, the Quintessons claimed that the T-Cog was their magically bestowed goodwill, and they scattered impressive shows of fireworks and other showmanship as they drew out bots, terrified and awed, upon whom to "lay on hands" and "accelerate their celestial development."

Well, the first few times they did it there was an explosion of hysteria and disbelief. Then in place of that, belief spread rapidly, like an unstoppable fire. My attempts to instill calm and rational doubt fell on uninterested ears in every quarter. Everybody was glued to the daily rounds of "elevations," and everybody was soon deep into the excitement of the lottery through which they might be selected as the next lucky bots to be made over into glory.

If only it hadn't worked, or had been a sham. But it worked every time, of course. After that, any word

of objection or question was a word of disloyalty and dissent, as welcome as a thirty spanner at a twenty-nut convention.

Once this had been successfully established as the Truth, the visitors revealed that the mighty Quintessons had suggested the Cybertronians might like to embark on a joint venture to further their advance to Universal power and authority. Each envoy was to pair up with a willing Cybertronian and form partnerships of mutual harmony and understanding as they accelerated our technical and scientific knowledge for the better. There was no shortage of volunteers. Ferrying "the Masters" around in altform soon became a badge of honor.

Within a few stellar cycles, Cybertron had gone from barbarian and semi-feudal chaos to an organized, passionate, devoted, and unified culture focused around personal and general development that would lead, inevitably, via the Quintessons, to the glory of mastering the universe. In some respects it was difficult to complain. As the old joke goes: But apart from fixing the roads, developing astrophysics, mastering spaceflight, opening dimensional portals, systematizing industry, creating order, imposing the just rule of law, inaugurating the office of the Prime, establishing an electoral system, regulating the orders of Form and Function, and giving us the ability to altform, *what* have the Quintessons ever done for us?

Indeed their arrival was the abrupt and unexpected conclusion to the Age of Origins.

THE AGE OF WRATH

The delusion that we labored for our own glory and distinction under the benevolent guidance of the Quintesson Imperium lasted for many, many cycles. It was only when the initial excitement and amazement at the "gift" of the T-cog began to subside that a few dissenting voices were able to be heard in public. By this time Cybertron and its society had changed beyond recognition. Across the planet there was a sense of unification that had never existed before. Though I would not have had this come about through deception, I cannot deny that it was a welcome change.

However, it was in nobody's interests to allow the ruse to continue. Fortunately the Quintessons' own greed provided the ground upon which an insurrection might be built. They had taken their partnership with individual Cybertronians to encourage the development of bots into their personal transports. Those who were not partners had been organized into "collectives," whose labor in mining, refining, and manufacturing produced goods and services, half of which were whisked offworld "to build ports suited to your arrival." The other half went into the construction of large objects and areas about which the "masters" explained relatively little, and if pressed, would only state that the function would become obvious as soon as matters were finished. These devices,

Right: Sentinel Zeta was voted in as Prime in a Quintesson-sponsored election and created an intelligence force to investigate the invaders

whatever they were, would be crucial to the next stage of Cybertron's advance.

One other result of this marshaling of progress was that the predatory and criminal bands that used to plague the tiny-city states of the past had been pushed right to the margins. There was an organized police force, which, like most centrally run institutions, was based in Iacon. The Razers, Breakers, and Wreckers, however, remained abroad, fighting one another, as often as not. Sometimes they would get hauled to jail, or to the medical bays for repairs, and be issued with sentences they ignored or attempted to avoid. The Wreckers in particular took it hard that their "good guy" efforts still had them labeled as lawbreakers. Law was new to Cybertron and not everyone took kindly to it. They were most usually the people who also didn't take kindly to the Quintessons and their "starry claptrap."

Even the most civil, however, were cowed and frightened by the justice system that the Quintessons pursued, as opposed to the one that we Cybertronians ran. This "Supreme Court" was more of a circus or a sport than anything else, a place were anyone could be brought up at any time to face trumped-up charges, be exposed, vilified, and then sentenced. The random selection of the "accused" and the default verdict of innocent, with its mandatory sentence of lifelong imprisonment (or death at the hands of the Quintesson's Sharkticon pets) existed as a terror mechanism for any moment where rebellion seemed likely. It also cemented a hatred of the Quintessons that they seemed blithely unaware of, confident in their control. I allowed that confidence to run on, and Iacon made only token protest as we facilitated the unrest elsewhere as best we could.

By the time restlessness and a feeling of lack of progress had set in, there was a viable resistance underground that had already formed itself out of the most radical bots. After they'd initially faced beatings and public censure, they'd learned to communicate in secret with one another, slowly forming networks of sympathizers across the planet. As leader of the Archivists at this time, I could not be seen having anything to do with them, but the Hall of Records had a mandate to track all events, andthe *Covenant* itself revealed their secrets to me when the time came, words of coded gibberish suddenly resolving into neat pages of facts before my very eyes. So I knew very well there was a war brewing, perhaps before anyone else did. Certainly not the masses, who were so used to their places now, so lulled with security and made obedient with terror, that they had forgotten they'd once been free to roam and gather as they pleased. Many of those lately made were emerging from the Well without names any longer as a direct result of our collective submission. In response to our acceptance of the rigid caste system, bots came out with designations according to the place of work that they were destined to inhabit, and the type of work they were fitted to do. The Quintessons said it was better that way, after their initial surprise. They said it was a beneficial evolutionary adaptation to circumstances, and that bots with designations would thrive happily in their labors, knowing and wanting nothing else beyond what they were already assigned.

I think that would have been the greatest tragedy, if it had been true. It was not true, although nobody tested it, and it would not be proven a craven, self-serving assumption until much later, when the Designated Bots had had enough time to refine the fuel of their wrath. One

in particular, D-16, was to become the living defiance of all things Quintesson, but that was for another Age.

NAMELESS

From the Well's rim a nameless bot emerged into the light of dawn. He had known for some time that the only opening available to him was in the mines, and he accepted this—or rather, he had until now. As he put his foot to the rim and began the walk out of the Well's paternal glow, he looked up and saw overhead the vast dome of the sky, black tinged with blue and green, the stars visible clearly overhead and the sun beginning to crest the horizon.

Something about the first rays of its incredible, blazing light made him pause to watch it rise all the way until it had cleared the edge of the world and begun to sail slowly into the sky. A fierce and passionate conviction formed inside him that the rights of his existence lay there, in that incredible pantheon of light, and not in the darkness with the rock and metal, although he saw no road leading there. He considered that he must go down into the dark and perhaps not emerge again. His designation called to him, dully: D-16. It meant nothing.

He looked at the ground and then back at the sky, and his heart closed on the sight, his first memory to carry with him. He knew then that he was not going to waste himself in the lightless pits. Others might, but if they were so weak as to surrender the vaults of heaven, then they weren't worthy of voyaging up and out, into the world. They may not have the will to rise and kick away their traces, but that was what he would do. As he turned on his way, he treasured this knowledge until, by the time he took the track to his post, it was diamond hard and crystal clear.

The only thing he needed was time; he would find a way. For now he could turn and walk from his desire, for he knew without a shadow of doubt that he'd be back.

A WEAKENING GRIP

Over all this the Prime—an elected position now occupied by Sentinel Zeta—ruled with what he considered the mandate of the people and what the Resistance referred to as "the control rod of the Quintessons shoved up his mainport." Either way, he was in charge, and most decisions of any impact went through Sentinel Prime and his council of thirteen at Iacon.

Sentinel was then a warrior who had emerged as the front runner in the election because he had a reputation gained in the warlord days, as a mercenary who could turn a battle in anyone's favor thanks to his steadfast, icy strategic mind and his particular gritty brand of charisma. He stood with the backing of those who had been and wanted to continue to feel themselves quite the local influence in spite of the new ideologies about governance that the Quintessons had imposed with their oily iron fist. Despite all our newfound ambitions to become "celestial" and "advanced," we mostly still respected might before other virtues, and although a scholar and an engineer ran him a reasonable race, Sentinel won convincingly in the final vote.

I note that against my expectations the Quintessons did not rig the election. I suppose it was not necessary. Whoever had taken office would have continued to play their game, or even believe in it: such was necessary to

carry the will of the masses who believed in the promises of exaltation faithfully.

Naysayers fared very poorly, making less than three percent at turnout. Some of their supporters were beaten and jeered at the polls. Sentinel himself was not a fool, however, and not about to be anyone's puppet. He requested information about these secret objects that were under construction, claiming it was his right to know.

For the first time ever, the "emissaries" of the Quintessons refused. Not directly. They said that we couldn't understand the technology yet, in our primitive scientific state, but as soon as a demonstration was available, then all would become apparent. Sentinel Prime immediately created a group of intelligence agents. Among them was Ultra Magnus, whom he talked out of the Wreckers, though he couldn't get the Wreckers themselves to turn into officers working for him. They had no respect for authority. It was part of their nature.

Wheeljack turned him down flat to his face with, "You're working us all like a smeltin' machine for a bunch of nobodies already. I ain't doin' nuthin' for you until the day you spit in their faces and kick them all the way back home." Ultra Magnus was to visit the sites where the work went the hardest, under the guise of conducting a crime survey. His real job was to obtain anything he could and bring it to the Agency scientists for analysis.

Among those scientists, the historian and archivist, Orion Pax, began to comb all records for information about the Quintessons that may have been overlooked in the joyous scramble for power. We have always had records of everything, it being so easy to make them, but we have not always had the time or need to study what has been taken down. Now he became an archaeologist, immersed daily in endless, tedious footage of all kinds.

The underground had its own experts on the move too by now, and they were extremely reluctant to pool

Above: Shockwave, the first to translate the Quintesson language

information with Sentinel's secret agency, not trusting that he wasn't a loyal servant of the invader. It was in their shadowy ranks that Shockwave, always dispassionate and detached, always following his only passion—knowledge—began to show his exceptional analytic talents. He was the first one to crack their language. Had it not been for Soundwave, serving on Sentinel Prime's council, we would not have been able to steal Shockwave's knowledge for ourselves and so begin the long process of interception and decryption of the emissaries' conversations with their homeworld.

So began a long and grim time of disillusionment. Though we had been skeptical, even the most dour of us had partly wanted to believe in that golden dream of ascent to the stars. But we all heard the truth in the exchanges and the plans. It was Soundwave himself who pointed out, "These streams of mathematics in their talk are projections of figures, profits, plans. They have many plans to fill many worlds with their schemes for which they need us, as their unpaid servants. . . . These are . . . sales figures."

CRACKING THE CODE

Sentinel Prime's face grew more thunderous daily, but we continued to play along with the emissaries until the day that a young engineer and his friend came before us, requesting an audience. Prowl and Bluestreak were nervous and stuttering, carrying plans and blueprints in their arms like they were going to drown us in scrolls

Above: Prowl, who helped Bluestreak discover the secret of the space bridges

and information. Bluestreak in particular began babbling straight away in a technical jargon that none of the council, frankly, understood. Prowl rolled his eyes and calmed him with a gentle tap on the arm in a familiar and kind manner, which spoke of their long and close friendship. Bluestreak immediately stopped, took a moment, and apologized, glancing humbly at Prowl and indicating with a jerk of his shoulder that Prowl could do the talking.

Prowl winked at him, then said, "What we came to say is that we think we know what these big open ring structures are that the Quints are building."

Sentinel Prime stood and looked over the diagrams. I wondered if they made sense to him or not, or if he did it

to make the two younger bots feel better. I think the latter. "And? You have our full attention."

Bluestreak tried to draw things in the air with his hands, circles, stretched. "They are one side of something, of a thing that has two of them. We thought that maybe the ones here . . . might be pairs, but they're not, they're coded in frequencies that don't match, so when . . . Er, I mean, they're things that will create very local warps in space and time, connecting their location with other places for which the operator already has coordinates relative to local and visible stellar positions. . . ."

Prowl gently broke in over his faltering mutter, "They're space bridges."

The council members looked at one another. We knew now how they planned to take us off planet without creating the much larger vessels we would have expected. We had designed and built starships in secret with the intent of checking the Quintessons' facts for ourselves. It would not be ships. It would be this new way we had never suspected.

I sat transfixed and silent. Space bridges. How would they have known to make those? Vector Prime was the last person I had ever seen create one. How would the Quints have got their hands on the notions of that object and how it worked? They must have got into my records somehow . . . But my pondering had to remain secret—I was not, as far as any suspected, Prime enough nor old enough to know.

"Why have they not used it already?" Sentinel asked, his steely gaze fixing the engineers on the spot.

"These plans . . . they're not, um, not complete. It's like these are something they don't understand themselves. You see there's a lot of calculations here . . . and here . . . where the math is actually incorrect for all known values, and in fact, they have the signs on these constants the wrong way around. . . ." Bluestreak stopped nervously as Sentinel raised his hand. Prowl patted him on the back.

"How is it that you know this and they don't?" Sentinel asked.

Bluestreak glanced hopefully at Prowl. Prowl said, "Oh well, we think that these are stolen. Ever since we've been working on them they've been making out like they've given us only bits of plans to teach us how to solve puzzles so that we're learning on the job. But it's obvious they don't know the answers. So we sent in schematics with some really obvious mistakes in and they passed them. So obviously they don't know anything about what it says."

I couldn't prevent myself smiling and neither, for a moment, could Sentinel. But he straightened his face and gestured imperiously. "You have done very well. Your methods of detection are most excellently devious. Gather up your plans and return to work as if nothing has happened. Simply continue for now. Be sure your information has not fallen on deaf ears."

They nodded and scrabbled to get together all they had brought, most of it quite ignored, and then were ushered out by the council's undersecretaries. Once the council room doors had closed Sentinel addressed us all, his voice quiet but so filled with rage and menace that we shook to our cores with the pressure of it.

"Friends. We have been most grievously betrayed. The time has come to prove it and to rid ourselves of these parasites before another stellar cycle passes. I declare war on the emissaries! We will fight them everywhere

and anywhere, until not a single one remains alive on Cybertron!"

In the end it was not open warfare but covert operations that were required to secure the support from the population that we would need to successfully thwart our thieving oppressors. They had their fingers deep in every aspect of the society they had built, and we would need unilateral action to oust them. It must not be revealed until the last possible moments. Surprise was an essential weapon we must use against their guile and superior technology. We came up with a plan and recruited more operatives suited to violence into the ranks of our secret army.

In these efforts, my own administration was much aided by Orion Pax, who had a natural talent for locating and finding sympathizers who were capable of action and holding their secrets. He became an aide I used often, knowing I could rely on his quick wits and loyalty to deal with any trouble that might arise as he went about under the pretense of ferrying legal documents around and about the council's satellite offices.

"Go find me someone light-fingered," I said one day not long after our meeting. "Find a contact who can get us one of those vehicles they used to get here in the first place. Then send Ultra Magnus to recruit them. Have the vehicle brought to the Tagan Heights' underground skunkworks, and have them break it down until they discover what these creatures are capable of offensively."

Thus Jazz was hired to steal a car. It was a risky business, and he had a reputation for slick moves of the kind that nobody as straight-hitting as Ultra Magnus could ever have pulled off.

"It's called syncopated rhythm," Jazz said, trying to demonstrate it to Ultra Magnus by moving his limbs and dancing a few steps around the much larger, bulkier bot. Ultra Magnus disapproved of it instinctively, sensing mockery, but he could see that short of punching out an emissary and stealing the vehicle himself, the job was

Right: Jazz became close friends with Orion Pax as they helped Prowl and Bluestreak disassemble a Quintesson ship

going to be easier by stealth and subterfuge. He gave Jazz the job and washed his hands of it gratefully.

Orion Pax was sent to record the vehicle's particulars. This is how he met Jazz, in the breaker's yard, where Prowl and Bluestreak studied the inner workings of the inert machine. Since neither of them knew much about what they were looking at, their conversations ranged far and wide, and by the end of the week's efforts they were friends. Then the car was restored to its original condition. Jazz went to return the car, and Orion Pax went back to the Hall of Records, a slightly taller and more confident bot than before.

But this was the last time that things went smoothly. The Quintessons were on the lookout for signs of rebellion and had begun to find many, not least because the resistance began to broadcast their opinions on pirate radio frequencies, which were not always well shielded–possibly deliberately, since they enjoyed taunting not only the invaders but also the council and the Prime, calling him a "tinfoil diplomat" and other contemptuous names. Then we discovered the Quintessons had bite as well as bark in their plans. They had taken the opportunity of being well-trusted in the early cycles to create small bases in deserted areas–places where they had been constructing some bots of their own, just in case we did change our minds about their presence: a large number of Sharkticons.

The first we heard of it in Iacon were some broadcasts on emergency channels that Soundwave picked up and relayed immediately–panicked, terrified bots could be heard in full flight, abandoning their posts. Through the screeching, battering noises of gunfire, missile shots, and sonic weapon blasts, we were able to decipher the hectic retreat of the resistance leaders from their boltholes as something monstrous and terrifying rounded them up and tore into them. It was a horrific moment for all of us to hear their petrified and panicked final moments and last stands, for we knew that this meant the end of any further efforts by the Quintessons to play nice.

"Some of these channels are Emissary frequencies," Soundwave reported. Which meant they knew we were listening in. It was a warning.

When we finally cut off the signals and the council sat in silence, Sentinel Prime said, "The time has come to expose them as the frauds they really are and to rally all of Cybertron. Soundwave, Elita One, Ultra Magnus, Alpha Trion, activate Plan T-Cog. We go to battle."

Fortunately we had devised our schemes in advance and to activate them took only the seconds required to contact our operatives and issue them the code words to set the operation in motion.

At the time, the Quintessons had a strong presence around the Well, where bots were still appearing with predictable regularity. We disabled them first in what must have seemed the strangest, most silent turn of fortune as every bot working there quietly dropped their tools, moved to the nearest emissary, and delivered a precisely calibrated EMP jolt to the base of their spines. This sent them into a fizzing incapacity for several cycles during which shackles and gags, carefully designed by Ratchet and Cogwheel, could be applied to them. Their insensible, helpless forms were then carted off to a holding building and stacked like so much rubbish by the Wreckers, who had been employed as prison guards in this moment and who took their duties very seriously indeed. Any rebellious, struggling emissary attempting to get a signal off

was to be given a hefty smite with a taserclub—although as Ultra Magnus later said, "We smote 'em all, jus' to be on the safe side."

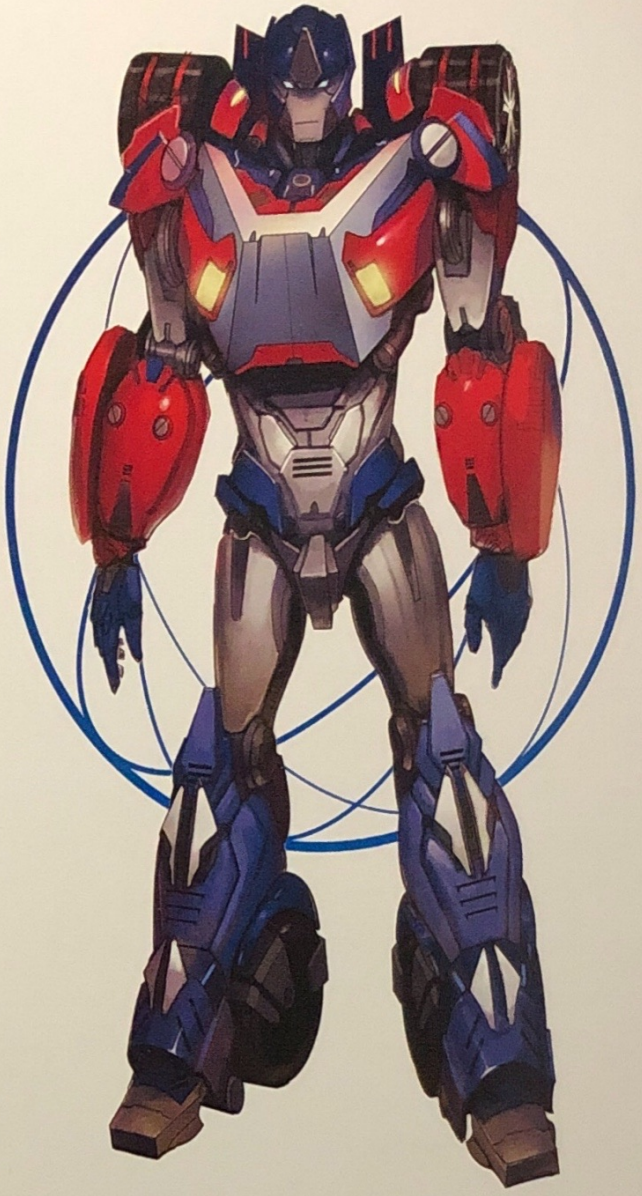
Having secured the Well, a broadcast was set up to be played simultaneously on all channels to all bots. Cogwheel went forward, introducing herself and explaining the situation as Ratchet moved to the Well head and greeted personally the next bot to emerge—quite unaware of the significance of their birthday moment to the entire well-being and future of Cybertron. Live on camera, the new arrival stepped out of the Well's aura at Ratchet's side, and we all watched in riveted silence as Ratchet used his live scanner to show the presence of the T-Cog, clearly visible where it was supposed to be at the central axis of the new bot's body.

"Can you tell us your name?"

"Silverbolt," said the bot, clearly bemused and staring around, but catching up fast in the easy way we all had, thanks to the speed with which we could share information with one another.

Cogwheel explained the shape-shifting mechanism in clear language, relaying the inner operational impulse that triggered the move from the T-Cog. She asked him to please show everyone that it did, indeed, work simply by an act of will and without any special intervention, even the first time.

"I don't know exactly what I'll be," Silverbolt said, a bit shy. "But I had some dreams on the way here about all kinds of interesting things that fly . . . oohhh!" And with that he altformed right on cue, surprising himself and everyone else as he became a sleek and elegant winged



Above: Orion Pax gets his first taste of war

dart, engines alight with power. Without so much as a backward glance, he zipped off and up straight into the sky over the Well's heart and drew a series of lazy loops against the dark blue and the stars.

Ratchet leaned into the camera then and said grimly, "Gift of the Galactic Masters, my exhaust."

Then the broadcast cut to a few images we had managed to gather of an actual Sharkticon attack.

The images were worth an endless supply of words, but Sentinel summed up for all of us with feeling. "Cybertronians, you have been used and deceived, and

now you are being slaughtered. The time has come to take up arms and rout the Quintessons from our world!"

ORION'S WAR

Orion Pax started the revolution where he'd spent the last years, at a desk in the Hall of Records. But as the reports he read piled high, he wondered if there wasn't something else he ought to be doing.

(The following records have had their places of origin encrypted as part of the Cybertronian Communications Corps. Protocols.)

"A******, Day X: After the announcement of war and an initial retreat by those Quintessons present in A****** to their embassy offices on W** Street, a series of missiles were launched from the embassy rooftops, targeting civilian and worker areas to five sectors. Widespread devastation and the scatter of radioactive elements have confounded efforts to rally troops and disperse aid in this township. In late afternoon, a counterforce of insurgents assaulted the embassy in a three-pronged attack: by land, by air, and through the city ducting conduits. Explosions and gunfire in the interior of the building ended a few hours later when an incendiary device inside exploded, killing the majority of the occupants. Total Civilian Casualties: 2,042."

"H****, Day X: Roadside carnage increasing at all points as Quintesson forces deploy Sharkticon hunter-killer packs to all significant transit hubs. Supply chains to Y******* and F**** cut off completely. Land Army losses: 35 percent. Vehicle losses: 89 percent. Suggest closure and abandonment of Sector in absence of reinforcements."

"R*** R*****, Day X: Civilian Medical convoy gunned down by missile attacks from airborne Judgment Class Devastators. 12 dead. No survivors."

"Z********, Day X: Disguised covert Quintesson operatives infiltrated the town of Z******* and planted toxic high explosives in public areas. These were remotely detonated at XX:XX local time. Casualties: 356. Missing In Action: 258."

"Y****, M***** D*** and points east, Day X: Fighting continues in all remote regions of this sector with nothing spared on either side. Wreckers observed in action alongside routine rebel forces. Judgment Class air support present all day and all night; bombardment continuous. No civilians are presumed left alive in this sector. Remaining troops are under siege. Losses: heavy, unknown. Quintesson ship brought down in the early hours of the morning by Cybertronian Air Recon at the loss of both flyers, others remain present. It is suspected the ruins of Y**** are sought as a potential stronghold due to the potent Energon mine beneath the city. Wreckers and survivors gather there for a final stand."

"K*******: Day X: Refinery, power station, and subgrid destroyed in heavy shelling. City abandoned. Civilian convoy heading overland to U**** U****. Two military teams remain to strip out usable debris. Sharkticon Mop-Up Squads reported on way via road, expected XX:XX local time. This will be the final report from this station."

Then one note really caught his attention from the endless lists of losses.

"J**** Outpost: Day X: Quintesson Adjudicator Vessel shot down at XX:XX local time. Rebel forces took possession of the ship. Iacon Council "Final Judgment" Protocol

exercised on all occupants. Appended medical records taken." The records were minute logs of the Quintessons who had been killed aboard, with images and analysis tagged for the Iacon Board of Medical Examiners. Orion Pax looked them over carefully, not really sure what he was seeing. He gathered up the data and took it to Alpha Trion.

Alpha Trion was never too busy to see him, and for that he was grateful. He offered an explanation and the reports, then waited, anxiously. The old bot studied them as he had, but for a much shorter time, and then looked at him thoughtfully. "What do you make of this, Pax?"

"I would say that this shows there is more than one type of Quintesson. Or, if they are all Quintessons, there's at least three types. Two we have never seen before. Unless those are alien allies of theirs. It's difficult to be certain, but the basic schematics and downloads suggest a strong relationship. They have other forms, sir."

Alpha Trion nodded, and instead of giving Orion Pax the data back for filing or passing on, he kept it himself. "I will take this personally to the Medical Officers. For now it is classified information. You have sworn to the Secrecy Act, so you will not mention it again, understood?"

"Yes, sir." Orion Pax hesitated. "What about the others who know?"

"You will seek out all communications on this subject and silence them for now. Issue instructions in person to the originators of this message and to the soldiers who stormed that ship—they are not to talk of it publicly."

"P-personally?" He couldn't quite believe it.

"Yes, personally. Convince them it is of the utmost importance that this not derail the war effort. We must carry on as if it was of no consequence, unless and until such time as the council decides that it is." Alpha Trion stared at him until he felt uncomfortable and then added, "I need someone to do this who is genuine and persuasive. Someone they will believe. Someone they can trust. That is you, Orion Pax. All those are your gifts. So go, pack your necessary items, and arm yourself. I will send Ultra Magnus with you. We cannot have paranoia weakening the population at this crucial stage. There must be no rumors of allies for the Quints, or any signal that they may have significant reinforcements."

The days that followed were a blur that took Orion Pax all the way back to his dim memories of the Cataclysm. At first he felt safe with the massive bulk of Ultra Magnus beside him, but that changed after they experienced their first air raid on the road out to J**** Outpost and the downed ship. Lightweight, insentient raidbots stormed at them out of clear skies, using the sun as cover, and Orion would have stood watching the road scatter into shrapnel right up to his own feet if Ultra Magnus hadn't picked him up bodily and heaved him off the raised road platform and down into the boulder-filled gully underneath. That shock was followed almost immediately by a cacophony of grenades going off. Then a missile struck one of the pillars supporting the road and they had to run, roll, and dive to escape the falling bulk of the expressway as it crashed into rubble right where they had been lying. Orion found himself crouching down, hands over his head, as Ultra Magnus stood up, roaring and launched his arm-cannons at the buzzing drones. He forgot he even had gun adaptations of his own and certainly every instruction about how to summon their activation with his T-Cog.

"You'll get used to it," Ultra Magnus said later as they had found some new, reasonable freeway strip that they could drive along. "That was nothin'."

Orion thought he'd rather not get used to it, but over the days of tracking that followed, they were repeatedly shelled or targeted by drones. They stumbled on pods of Sharkticons sent to loot and terrorize pockets of civilians left in the ruins of the towns surrounding the Outposts, wandered into minefields, almost filled their reserve oil tanks with polluted "fragzine," which would have corroded them to death in minutes, and had to shoot their way in and out of Cybertronian checkpoints against Quintesson snipers. To Orion it was one, huge, unending misery—one shock to another—until he was too tired to react in any way other than Ultra Magnus did. He saw what was going on, he took cover, he defended himself and his companion, he survived, and he pursued his mission objectives. Feelings no longer came into it at all. He moved with administrative efficiency, almost unconscious of what changes had happened to him, until one day he looked up and saw that he had crossed the last name off his list. Everyone was informed.

Ultra Magnus was patiently waiting for him, the last of their Energon packs in his hands. "Where to now?"

"Back to Iacon," Orion Pax said, surprised himself that this moment had actually come, and he was not in twenty pieces at the bottom of a bomb crater.

Magnus nodded and then reached out and clapped his massive hand on Orion's shoulder. "Good job."

Orion Pax waited for him to add the usual "librarian" or "for a civvy," but he didn't. Ultra Magnus grinned at him, gave him his Energon, and then altformed.

"Let's roll out!"

Then we found their starship in orbit, far out, decloaking to receive the influx of refugees before it hightailed it out of weapon range and out of the system. It was a rout indeed, and after our victory had settled, we were left with a great deal of damage to mop up; not only the Sharkticons and other mindless warbots that had been left to exact revenge, but also the tattered remnants of our pride and self-worth.

There were many questions to be answered, and many legacies to deal with. But out of the sudden turn, the war, and the victory, it was Sentinel Prime and the council who appeared to be the masterful leaders of the coup, and to their disgust the insurrectionists of the resistance were largely relegated to footnotes. The balance of power did not alter; in fact it was entrenched by the successes of the expulsion. The temporary measure of leaving the Quintesson-imposed caste system in place—with workers at the bottom and elite at the top—became entrenched as the new administration struggled with the effort to rebuild and put off constitutional change for some better future moment which never came. Bots continued to be created with designations instead of names, directed right from the moment of making to a specific production niche from which they could expect no mobility at all, as if even the Well of All Sparks had grown depleted by the regimented nature of society.

There was a brief orgy of destruction in which the less imaginative populace took out their rage on Quintesson technologies and structures left behind. However, strong words from Sentinel Prime and stronger actions from the Wreckers and those of the Razers and Breakers who

had been temporarily "tamed" into a rough militia police force, soon stopped that. They contented themselves with ritualized burnings of Quintesson effigies, with mock show trials of Quintesson ringleaders, and theatrical re-enactments of great victory moments, usually involving the gruesome death of at least a hundred enemies, and the pitiful executions of more. Drum fires and celebrations thundered long into the nights that year.

However, a new sense of potential and excitement took hold for most bots once they had vented their wrath on the Quintessons and their works. They discovered a determination to make the best of all they had so that they could not be taken for fools again. When its emotional toxicity had died back, we picked up bits and pieces of imported technology and began to adapt and re-engineer them for our own use. The "space bridges" that had been attempted in the occupation were, for the most part restored. With their mathematics corrected and sufficient Energon obtained to power them, they were eventually ready to be used. Cybertron was about to take its first unaided step offworld and into the rest of the universe.

ONE GIANT LEAP

When the day came for the activation of the first space bridge, it found Orion Pax ready and waiting. Although he could have gone to a viewing area with Jazz he had set out alone early in the morning to a spot that he knew would be deserted. It was in the hills above Iacon, high but isolated. He'd chosen it carefully, using maps, and hadn't taken into account how hard it would be to climb. As time went on, he realized he was going to be late, while Jazz and the others would already have their spots and be waiting and enjoying the talk and the buzz of the crowd. He began to wonder if he'd made a terrible mistake. He was going to miss it. The event of . . . of the . . . of *ever* . . . would happen, and he would be stuck behind another fall of boulders seeing nothing but his own stupid feet. Even his altform didn't help him here, because the ground was too rough and unstable. Grimly, he figured this was the last time he did all his research work from a desk. Then, just as he heard the triumphal fanfare announcing the opening itself, he also realized that the brow ahead of him was the crest of his hill.

He was not a small bot, but he raced the final metrons to his place as quickly and lightly as the nimblest insecticon, and just as he did so, the bridge activated and a glowing green corridor of light leaped out across the sky over and above him and far out into the uttermost distance, casting a long shadow from his feet down over the watching city below. He was not even cued into the live feed from the Adventuring Team, but it didn't matter. He'd been there. He'd seen it. Cybertron was not the sum of the universe. It was only the beginning.

He'd tried hard to concentrate on his duties in the archive for the entire week before the bridges were due to be opened, but he couldn't. Every few cycles his mind would quietly detach itself from considering the records of events on Cybertron and how to index them for future reference, and would sneak off into little reveries about what might be found at the other end of the bridge. Given that the Quintessons had already proved there was other life, albeit dangerous life, he couldn't help

Opposite: Orion Pax witnesses the opening of the first space bridge

his imagination running riot and seeing endless vistas opening, one after another, into all kinds of strange, new worlds filled with peculiar, wonderful creatures, all waiting right now to be discovered. . . . And it would be this week! This week they would see, they would hear, they would *know* things about these other worlds and nothing would ever be the same again.

He woke up suddenly from a dream of a place made entirely of colored mineral rocks glittering like frost, in which beautiful winged things like insecticons, but much more delicate, floated and clinked, singing to one another—and found himself face-to-face with Alpha Trion, the chief archivist and councilor, and his boss.

". . . I said," Alpha Trion was apparently repeating. "I received your notice requesting the day off to see the bridge opening. "

"Yes!" Orion Pax said quickly. "I know it can be seen from here, but I wanted to be able to get closer than that. I mean, it's a historic moment and . . ."

"You may go," Alpha Trion said, in the tones of a conditional reprieve, "*if* you promise to stop logging Sharkticon footage under 'Scary Monsters' and stop listing entries about Shockwave as Soundwave. I know they are similar, but Soundwave is a councilor, and Shockwave is, at best, a rogue with some very disreputable decisions in his past, who lives outside the law. We file for accuracy, not by ear."

Orion Pax nodded, feeling alarmed that his daydreaming had caused such silly errors. He apologized and didn't notice Alpha Trion's smile.

"Do you wish you were going?"

The question caught him unawares, though he wondered if the answer showed on his face. "Yes, I would. To be the first to set foot on alien ground! It would be amazing. . . ." He remembered the long years of struggle, surviving under the terror of the Predacons, before there was anything resembling civilization. He remembered the effort to stay useful, to stay occupied with interesting activities, as all around him fights broke out over territories, powers, and rivalries. He had kept his head down all this while, small and insignificant and attempting nothing more glamorous than merely living. It was as if all that had been leading to this time, when someone like him could dream dreams that were actually possible, when his notions of all that could be *would* be, and it wasn't just to pass the time before some other bot came and spoiled things with their rage and their violence, forcing him to move on and leave whatever small organization and peace he had behind him.

"You see a future in the stars?" Alpha Trion asked him quietly.

Orion Pax thought, feeling self-conscious, because he wasn't used to such attention. Although Alpha Trion didn't overwhelm him, he felt a certain strange reverence for him, partly for his scholarship and his command over the *Covenant*, that odd book that he kept, with its peculiar properties, and partly because Alpha Trion was the oldest bot he knew, and whenever you asked him a question about something, he nearly always had the answer or a view or an angle on it that you'd never have thought of before.

"The stars look endless to me," he said eventually. "Out there, you could just go and go, and there'd be enough space for everyone, and things to do and see that go on forever." He risked a look at Alpha Trion's face and was surprised to see quiet thoughtfulness there. "You

must think I'm naïve. Everyone says I'm a dreamer." He waited for the other to agree.

But Alpha Trion shook his head. "Dreamers are in too-short supply on this world," he said. "And so far there wasn't so much to dream about, but the times are coming when we will need more visionaries, of one kind or another. Do I think it is naïve to feel idealistic about the unknown? No. If we didn't feel that way we'd be nothing more than Predacon fodder, and rightly so. Instead we've taken their place at the top of things, and now we're adventuring abroad. There'll be time enough for reality later."

Orion was calmed by Alpha Trion's acceptance, and elevated. For the first time, he considered himself as something potentially worthwhile, a bot who had something to offer the world instead of one who awkwardly negotiated with it. The idea scared him a little, but he held on to it, experimentally, and for the rest of that day, at least, managed to correct his mistakes and apply himself without creating many more.

A few days later he began, on his own, a personal project to assist the filing of the records and to help those who came searching for answers within the libraries of Iacon—he began to design a set of symbols that would stand for each of the world's major ages, with which items and entries could be easily marked and searched. As much as being useful, he wanted to do it for Alpha Trion, who had sent him out into the war instead of leaving him to fly a desk, and who had given him the opportunity to change.

Although the Quintessons had been routed and celebration was great, there was also an undercurrent of disappointment running through the world at the realization we had been duped, and our hopes of this accelerated development and galactic importance were sadly premature. In the absence of the "masters," their vast and highly legislated administration also remained, so entrenched in mind as well as in practice, so commendably useful in production, that it was not broken up and salvaged to craft a different path. As a result, the caste system remained exactly as it was, and D-16 and all other bots continued as they had before, with the only noticeable change a few names and numbers, but no concrete alteration to their lives or prospects. Repeatedly we show ourselves vulnerable to the power of systems, I regret to record.

Above: Space Bridge technology spread quickly after the Quintessons were defeated

THE GOLDEN AGE

After the Quintessons were vanquished, there followed a long age of harmony and achievement on Cybertron, unique in our history. We began by reclaiming all they had made and fashioning it anew to our tastes. The life of bots is always most rewarding when the tasks they are most fit for stretch before them day on day. If they are able to spend their time in happy tinkering of whatever sort, then that is their ultimate contentment. It would be nice if all our Forms and all our Functions fitted together like bolt and nut, but they do not. Tempers, inclinations, and natures differ widely, and our interests often conflicted. Even so, aside from all the usual scuffling and infighting a large population might expect, we enjoyed a period of expansion and growth as never before.

The Well of All Sparks produced many new bots in this time, particularly in the first half of the age. This was taken as a grand gesture of Primus himself smiling upon us, and an upwelling of new little cults sprang up all around as bots tried to express their faiths, hopes, and gratitudes for their deliverance into this lucky era. The revival and reinterpretation of ancient myths and stories became a popular leisure pastime, especially for

Above: The citadel of Iacon

the entertainment industry that bloomed as the state and individuals gained a certain amount of wealth in terms of time, energy, and resources.

At the same time, we developed great skill with the building and use of space bridges. For the next eight thousand stellar cycles we became galactic explorers. We searched for planets where we could make safe fall, most often uninhabited ones, and began construction of offworld bases. Many planets were very unlike our own, low on metal content but sometimes high in other useful materials. We decided that it would be beneficial to convert the most promising into something more like our home, and thus an engineering project of a hundred stellar cycles began, which ended finally in the production of a conversion beam, based on space-bridge technologies, that was capable of taking and reforming matter from one elemental state to another, given sufficient material from which to draw energy.

With these two abilities operational, we spread ourselves to more than two hundred locations both near and very far within the same galactic arm. It would have been possible to go much farther, but there was no need. We made our first full conversion test on a large asteroid in a system safely two light-years away and watched as an unprepossessing rock became the metallized image of Cybertron, in miniature. All it lacked, we discovered upon closer examination, was a Spark.

The Energon required to power a single space bridge was not insignificant. Keeping them open was impossible; they had to be used and then closed, reducing their transmission ability for comms only. After much debate, it was decided that terraforming projects must include the transport and generation of a new Well of Sparks upon each planet. This would lessen the dependence of the outer worlds upon Cybertron and cut back on the energy drain we faced at home—something which we had not considered important until it was drawn to our attention by one of the surveying teams on the far side of the planet that Energon stocks were low and new deposits of crystalline Energon increasingly harder to find.

Because there was so much development ongoing and the prospect of a nearly infinite frontier, conflicts had threatened to break us into a smaller collection of states. Groups for planetary colonization formed themselves naturally around clusters of like-minded bots. And in order to meet the enormous demands for tech developments and production, those who were already working on Cybertron at maximum capacity did not get the opportunity to change their routines, even now. Form for a bot much determines its function in society, and so, under Sentinel Prime's steady, confident command, the caste system ground relentlessly onward. Questions about social equality were posed, but it was a rare bot who laid down tools and followed a new path in life. The very notion of one's place in the order of things was considered almost a law of physics. Those who were restless were pointed at the skies and departed. There seemed to be so many options, so much hope. I remember the first day that we took the fire of life to another place.

LIGHT ON ARCHON

It was a planet just larger than Cybertron itself, about four light-years away, orbiting a green star. This star gave out so much energy itself that even without Energon stores of its own, Archon's photo-reactive surface,

made with such care, could support a population easily. There was no life there before our arrival; we were careful of that, not wanting our great step to be marred by crushing something else out of existence. Archon was a rock, without atmosphere, just close enough to its star to be a cool world for us, with nighttime temperatures falling to an acceptable minus ninety, and daytime highs not exceeding a hundred and fifty, at least equatorially. The expansion and cooling would cause issues, but we even engineered for that, storing the energy of the heating by converting it to electricity and storing it in batteries that were built into the planet's deeper skin.

I don't think there was a single bot who wasn't glued to a newsfeed, watching the beam change Archon from dust and dirt and hard shadows to the precise, reflective lines and silvered curves of a truly civilized world. Day and night it slowly touched the distant surface in ways most of us did not understand, and when it was done, Archon was lighter by some significant megatonnage, having surrendered that mass into the energy required to convert it. It was still larger than Cybertron itself, however, and copied it in most ways, not least the deep-core system in position that was a replica of our Well of AllSparks.

The colonization party was large, and composed of volunteers who had given their names and professions into a lottery system—to say it was oversubscribed was no exaggeration. A huge celebration was set up to commemorate the historic moment when they would gather the essential ignition fire from the Well of All Sparks and bear it with them across the bridge to the new world. We agreed unanimously that this honor couldn't be bestowed to a single bot, as it was too important, and so in the end, a chain was made that stretched from the Well on Cybertron, across the Iacon plazas to the new entertainment park named Six Lasers, and then beyond into the Port Authority where it continued up and into the space bridge and then across to Archon's port, from there taking the final short trip to the Archon Well-head. It would become an institution over the centuries that followed, an ever-greater ceremony with fanfares and spectacular firework shows and sporting events in honor of the travelers: racing, aerobatics, dueling, and competition of every kind.

As the Prime, Sentinel was the one who did the talking, but it was I who wrote his words, or rather, it was the *Covenant*, in one of its rare moments of revelation, that met me one day with pages open and the Stylus lying across it as though I had been writing in it, when I hadn't done any such thing.

"Torchbearer, you will carry the fire of life, the Spark which animates us all, to a new world. With the blessing of Primus and the spirit of the AllSpark, let the Well of Archon burn bright and live long."

A parade of doomsday cultists, who were certain this was going to result in the quenching of the Well and the end of the world, tried a last-ditch effort to sabotage proceedings, firing rockets from the spectator stands and hysterically shrieking on a variety of frequencies. The Wreckers—now the longest arm of the law, and still the roughest, soon quieted them, and for those out of reach of easy security, the precision sniping of Moonracer, armed

Opposite: Sentinel Prime lights a torch from the Well of Cybertron to bring the Spark to the new colony on Archon

with EMP bullets, brought peace. The unconscious bodies were quickly dragged out of sight and left under the stands. Meanwhile Sentinel Prime followed his exacting orders and symbolically dipped the end of his specially engineered and impressive torch into the mouth of the Well.

There was a reverent hush—from the crowds as they expected greatness; from those of us in on the details as we felt a silent moment of terror in case, after all, the Well was truly beyond engineering and a part of Primus that was so deeply embedded in his being that to interfere with it really was, as the cultists said, to ruin the fragile source of all our beings. In the end, for all our calculation and intuition and science, there were still a few of us who "believed" that Primus was a gigantic living one of us. You mess with your gods at your peril. Fortunately for him, Sentinel Prime wasn't privy to the doubts we on the technical side still harbored. He stood with poise and confidence and presently, through a million hidden and delicate, arcane machineries, was granted a sudden burst of intensely brilliant yellow-white fire. The end of the torch—an artistically crafted metal cudgel that looked as if made of metallic bones—was suddenly filled by pulsating light. With nonchalant and then triumphant pride, Sentinel held it aloft. It was so brilliant that all but his feet were entirely lost in the glare. Irises all over Cybertron spun shut and retinal pickups burned out. For a few minutes nearly everyone in the front rows was blind.

But then they recovered and so too did Sentinel Prime, walking forward entirely on infrared, although he gave no sign of alarm at the loss of his primary vision. He reached the Well's edge and the first of the long relay who would run the torch to Archon. It was Bluestreak, Prowl's engineering friend. Almost hysterical with nerves but sobered by the importance of his task, he took the torch from Sentinel, with a bow that scraped his forehead to his knees.

"For glorious futures!" he cried, sticking more or less to the script, and then ran the short leg of his allotted distance to the next bearer, waving and cheering and leaping all the way with excitement, and behind the cordon Prowl running with him and keeping pace every step until the baton passed up the line and the attention with it. I didn't see their farewells. The newsbot had rushed on to follow the torch's journey.

As each carrier let go, they joined a growing tail of running bots trailing the flame, which continued to bob merrily and lead them onward across Iacon, across Six Lasers down to the smooth bowl of the Port Authority, and through the long, straight line of the vast cargo road where loaders and cranes all twinkled with lights and bowed in reverence. A lifter vehicle took the last landbound runner up to the high orbit of the Bridge Station, and then they could just be seen flickering up and up onto the vivid green ramp which seemed to arch as if it were only going across a chasm to the next province and not all the way to a distant system and a waiting, empty world. The torch party ran on, or drove, or flew, as the whim took them, singing all the way, the light casting their shadows back to long after they themselves were lost to sight in the twisting green depths of the bridge.

On Cybertron then, the hubbub died back and there was a tense time of waiting for the first images to be relayed from Archon. When they came through, pixelated and grainy at first, but then clearly as the bridge operators fine-tuned their machines, an enormous cheer went up that shook the foundations of every building, and, in some cases, caused the weakest and oldest ones

to fall down. A stand collapsed under the pounding of several thousand bot feet, but although there was a huge mess, nobody was hurt and the last were pulled, dazed, from the wreckage just in time to see the arrival of the torch at the Wellhead on Archon. The leader of the away team, Metalhawk, walked carefully to the appointed spot and raised the flame for all to see. He held it there for a moment, and again we had to wait in complete suspense.

Then he dropped it.

As it fell out of sight into the carefully positioned receptacle, it was whisked away to the cradle gears that had been copied so faithfully from our own Well's deepest structures. We trusted to luck that the light itself would ignite some reaction at that point. For the onlookers, however, it just looked as though Metalhawk had dropped the torch into the Well's mouth. There was a long, long, almost interminable wait. The present councilors with me all exchanged looks, each as helpless as the last.

Even Metalhawk lost his nerve and glanced down after a minute or two, though otherwise he didn't move. I wondered how long he would have stood there had nothing happened. Fortunately for him and for everyone it didn't come to that. A gentle radiance, not as intense as Cybertron's Wellgleam, but significant still, began to glow up from the center of the pit. As it did so, all the tracks and energy pathways of Archon that had been black and silent filled with a running liquid light, silvery and delicate. It traced out the planet's Patterner forms with mercuric speed and a gasp of collective awe and an "ahhh!" of amazement filled the airwaves. There was now no doubt about it. The operation was an astounding success. Archon lived.

The rest of the evening and the night was taken up with celebration and partying. Nobody was exempt. It went on for weeks. Even when we were opening up planets every month, the sense of joy and expectation didn't dwindle. It was the best, the most positive and glorious time of our lives. We grew, spread, prospered, and were enriched by alien cultures every stellar cycle almost. For another huge span of time there was nothing of note to spoil our delighted development. Even the beings we met from then on never proved so difficult or unpleasant as the Quintessons, and many were glad to find us and to be found. It was all so very, very satisfying.

HARD LIMITS

The first inklings of trouble came from the Keepers, whose business was the management and guardianship of Cybertron's material structure. They said that the off-world storage and export of Energon must cease. Supplies on the homeworld were running short. In addition, the development of new worlds must be suspended pending an investigation. The Well of All Sparks had ceased to produce bots at its normal speed and was now creating them at a tenth of its ordinary rate.

The investigation proved lengthy and inconclusive. The only facts that could be stated had already been noted, and the rate did not drop further, but even with the suspension of new projects, neither did it increase. We were forced to accept the fact that Energon itself, and the Spark too, were finite objects. Given that there was no Energon that did not come originally from Cybertron, and that all bots needed it, we reluctantly concluded that the Well was possibly cutting down the population expansion because it would not be sustainable. Other planets reported the same. It seemed that the Spark, however

divided it may have been, was unified in its counting and measures. No Well anywhere was creating bots as it used to. What had been a flood over the last age was now a trickle.

The second portent of things going amiss was at first less impressive than this sobering development. A ship transporting cargo between a world and its moons went missing after posting some disturbing final communications. It reappeared again a few days later, not far from its final coordinates, but did not respond to incoming hails. It simply drifted, silent and dark.

An investigation team was sent out. We didn't think much about it, until a report came through that said, "Missing ship recovered, towed to lunar Port. Crew infected with 'rust' plague. Analysis confirms nanobot infestation of type unknown, virulent, lethal: suspect engineered anti-mechanoid weapon. Ship cargo manifest included 'Case of Unknown Origin, recovered among other alien objects from Research World #182.9' (a dead planet containing only remnants of advanced civilization). Cargo was to be stored in Deep Facility pending further investigation, as it was considered too dangerous to remain on-world. Case showed signs of extreme degradation, supposed locking mechanisms perished, lid unhinged. Crew fatalities: all. Port fatalities: 1,288 and rising. Plague breaks down subject at molecular level, reducing metals to salts and oxides. Cure: none. Efforts to engineer a retrophage nanomachine halted due to death of scientific staff and destruction of technology capable of nanoengineering. Have alerted all ports that received vessels from this station at any time since the recovery of the World #182.9 objects and all who may have been in contact with exposed individuals. Attempts to isolate and halt active plague advance in subjects include cauterizing, freezing, and vitrification. All failed. EMP signal interference treatment shows moderate success but only slows rate of progress by 0.3 percent. Only complete success freezing test subject to absolute zero (impractical and impossible now that the refrigeration suites have also been rendered into dust). Final Analysis: Risk—100 percent. Cure—None. Containment—Quarantine. Suggested Actions for Infected Worlds: Total destruction. May Fate smile upon you, Cybertron. This will be the final Transmission from Technatron. RIP." A list of all the contacted worlds and systems was appended. It was a long, long list.

After we had read this in Council, silence reigned for a moment, the Energon issue and all our previous woes forgotten. A few hours later and we were listening to frantic bridge operators chattering to one another down the lines with garbled reports of deaths, plague, panic.

We received a live camera feed of a medical examiner named Backburner who took us on a tour of one of the infected cargo craft, his voice completely flat of affect as he narrated the findings. We saw room after room of inexplicably corroded structures, honeycombed walls and floors, instrumentation that crumbled to dust under his touch and plumed red and sinister into clouds in the air. In farther rooms that red dust was everywhere, deep enough to wade through. He pointed at various shapeless lumps here, there . . . and said that these unrecognizable heaps were all that remained of the crew, to his knowledge.

Then he turned the camera's pitiless light onto the body of a bot that was still very recognizable, although it was dead. "This is Soaring, my paramedic. He arrived with

Opposite: Soaring, a victim of the Rust Plague

me yesterday aboard this vessel. . . ." Soaring looked fine until you got to his upper chest and the side of his face. Then it was as if he'd been struck with a most powerful acid. His body was riddled with cavities, holes you could see through. Where his Spark should have been there was darkness, and Backburner grimly poked his finger into it. The fragile remains crumbled at his touch, and with a slipslide of red dust, half of Soaring's body fell to pieces in a sudden scatter that made everyone jump.

The camera looked down at Backburner's legs, already dark red and showing signs of decay. He turned the lens up to himself and stared down it at us. Now his complete lack of hope was obvious. "I guess none of us are going to be leaving this ship. I don't know what this is, but it's the most contagious thing I've ever seen. Two hours ago Soaring was completely fine. I understand we have been towed to yards, but now we are heading out again at my request. Once we are far from orbit, I'll be blowing these detonators. I hope . . . I hope this report does something useful. If you find more ships like this, don't touch 'em. Just blow them into plasma. Don't let anything survive. Well. That's done, then."

The feed clicked off.

Sentinel Prime surveyed us all one at a time. "There are three other missing ships as of now. Suggestions welcome . . ."

We said all the obvious things: there could be other outcomes, we didn't know enough . . . everything to delay having to face the consequences of that terrible recording and the worse report. We delayed, too complacent with the ages of success and overconfident in our abilities to overcome anything, but the next hours filled up with SOS messages coming in from all over the galaxy, some voices hysterical, others quiet and resigned, all saying the same things:

"There's Plague here. Confirmed today . . ."

"We have twenty cases of death by Rust Plague. We're going to shut down comms until it's over. I know you're working on this. You are working on this, aren't you, Cybertron?"

"They're saying there's Plague here. I think they're trying to keep it a secret, but too many people at the docking area have gone missing. . . . I think it's the Plague. . . ."

"Cybertron! You scrap merchants! Why aren't you doing something? We're dying out here, and you don't even answer our hails! When will the cure be ready? When can we expect some help?"

Within another few hours the calls were often incoherent. Terror and gibbering filled every channel, followed by the inevitable silence, and then, after some period, white noise. Sentinel Prime issued the order. "This is an emergency protocol, Situation Absolute. Every space bridge on Cybertron and all other worlds is to be destroyed immediately. There will be no movement of persons or goods across any channel. Communications will be also cut and not reinstated except by ordinary signals transmission. Anyone found violating these orders will be considered a traitor and subject to immediate execution."

PROWL AT THE BRIDGE

Prowl left the emergency meeting with a sickly sensation, not even going back for the research he had left behind in his eagerness to get out of the room. The only thing he could think of was getting back to his post at the orbital

station Iacon Port Bridge and calling Bluestreak. He had a plan for getting Bluestreak back, although he might not make it before they called a shutdown. . . . He might not be able to persuade him to return, just like he hadn't been able to persuade him to stay. He switched to his altform and burned his way along the roads faster than he had ever gone before, and without a word of explanation, overrode the permission protocol on the orbital shuttle dock and flew himself up and out to the bridge at velocities that threatened to break the little ship apart.

When he arrived, the first thing he did was open the line to Bluestreak.

The channels were crammed with calls, not surprisingly. Rust Plague had found its way onto other worlds. Prowl's feelings sank into the floor as he realized one was Archon.

"You have to come back now," he insisted, as forcefully as he could, using the voice he always used when Bluestreak was talking technobabble a mile a minute, in order to get him to focus.

"I can't," Bluestreak said. "Law and logic say it's not possible. I could bring the Plague with me."

"But you don't have it. Do you? It hasn't reached the Port. Come on, I'll hold the line open, you can come over, I'll sign it off, hide it, we can run away, I'll erase it from the files, they'll never know. Come *on*!"

There followed one of those pauses Prowl just knew was filled with Bluestreak stubbornness, his set face going over all the facts one more time to be sure. He was ready to run over the bridge and kill him.

"I just can't do that." Another pause. Blue's voice said it all. Prowl didn't need the words, hadn't really needed them for the last thousand stellar cycles, but he liked to hear them anyway, the background to his days, the burble of comforting and irritating and familiar and friendly engineering facts and figures, and he already missed it so much he couldn't speak. "I'm sorry, Prowl. I guess I maybe shouldn't have gone, but nobody knew this would happen. You know, those guys are out there right now trying to isolate the town and . . . plasma-score some kind of halt to it. They might make it. I mean the plasma does work. If you can get it all."

Above: Ironhide, bridgemaster at Iacon's port

"But look, you don't have it. It will be perfectly fine. Just come on—I can hear talk in the building now. They're going to come and shut it down. . . . You've only got a few seconds left. We'll debate the right and wrong of it after, yeah?"

Prowl listened, waited, looked at the empty, gaping mouth of the green tunnel, through which nothing came . . . and nothing came. He was already fit for execution. He was in direct disobedience of Sentinel Prime's directive.

The door opened behind him and in came Ironhide. Prowl glared at him over his shoulder, but he knew what Ironhide would say already. For once the heavy, deliberate face of the police bot was almost meek. He knew Prowl well, from Port duties. He knew who was on the other side of the line.

"Time to shut up shop," Ironhide said softly.

Prowl turned back to the control panels.

"I have to go," Bluestreak said from the com. "I got the order to blow the bridge control from this end. Look man, don't feel bad. It's just an accident. One of those things. I have to stay and do this, and so do you. Law and logic, they come first. Duty's what we do."

Prowl heard the falter at the end of the sentence. He racked his mind for the right thing to say, feeling like he should have said it sooner, when he had all those ages free, and had spent them bickering and interrupting and taking it all for granted. He couldn't bear the idea that in a moment Bluestreak and all of Archon would be cut off, perhaps forever, left to a horrible death in silence, far from Cybertron and those who cared for them. But he and Blue were made from the same mold. Blue was right. Law and logic. Duty first. He had no choice.

"Prowl." Ironhide's prompt was so quiet. He'd expected a roar. This was worse. He watched his hands enter the commands to disrupt the energy flows and turn them against themselves. A thing like a bridge was hard to make, easy to ruin. He and Blue had made them, and now they would take them down.

Finally he spoke, not even knowing what he was saying until the words came. "I'm going to miss you."

"You too."

The line became a hiss and then it became nothing. The beautiful green ring folded up like crinkling sheet foil and went out with a stuttering burst of flares. There was a pause, and then they felt and heard the sudden sharp bang and whine of massive machineries fusing, burning, and collapsing in on themselves. The metal ring of the bridge's works snapped at the top and cracked open and then hung there, no more than slag and scrap.

Prowl looked at the dead instrument panel and took his hands off it slowly. He turned around.

"Good work," Ironhide said.

Prowl nodded. He stood there a long time, but nothing changed. Ironhide left. Outside others were shrieking, talking. He made his way back to Cybertron and to his home alone, slowly. Everything had ended, and inside himself some part of him had ended too. He knew the odds. He had no hope at all. All that was left was the memory and Logic, and Duty, and the Law.

The quarantine was successful. Nobody went in or came out, and after a few months had passed, there was silence on all frequencies there. We listened for longer, but there was nothing to hear except the soft rush of black static.

Opposite: Prowl blows up the space bridge, with Ironhide at his side.

THE AGE OF RUST

Equilibrium punctuated by cataclysmic events of near extinction. This is the fate of all life in the Universe, but still, once it happens it seems so personal, so unique. The extent of the losses is hard to grasp. Even worse, perhaps, the foreclosure of all the futures that had seemed to be so close they were nearly within reach.

The plague of rust taught us that we were not powerful or particularly godlike, not specially selected. It could be that other beings would draw a different lesson to the one we chose for ourselves from this tragedy. It was not our nature to dwell on ruin. We sifted the remains and counted. We took shelter in facts and figures. We considered our options and what we could say about the end of so much of ourselves and decided that to rage against circumstance was a foolish illogic, much as it might feel justified. We determined to make the most of what remained, setting aside a day per megacycle in which we would commemorate our past, but otherwise to turn and face forward. Forward, after all, is the only direction that life takes, like it or not.

A thorough census and inventory was conducted on Cybertron once the initial shock had passed. We found ourselves to be a relatively small population, but this was no issue since our stocks of Energon were greatly depleted, with no prospects of recovering shipments that had been sent elsewhere now, and no immediate method of discovering if more existed anywhere else. We were forced to assume that what we had left was all that there would be. The good news was that we were rust-free, although we remained on alert for any sign of it for several hundred cycles before our vigilance began, inevitably, to wane.

In the meantime the old social orders we were used to from ancient times became re-entrenched. Partly it was from a sense of security in the known, which we badly needed. Partly because it made the rationing of the Energon supply that much easier. With everyone in their role, assigned as best they could be according to how they were made, there were enough people to mine and process raw materials and to keep up with demands. It was nothing like the previous era, where everything had looked outward and skyward, with such plenty that the caste system seemed merely a convention.

We did begin a modest space program, but it was mostly a tinkering job, undertaken only when there was time left over from the conversion of all our existing insentient machinery from the use of processed Energon to electricity as their source of power. We developed other forms of engine too, which ran on various chemical or nuclear reactions, but these were minor interest objects. We had no source of materials to supply them in any numbers, and the manufacture of small-enough reactors was excessively difficult compared to the actual returns. We utilized solar power, since we already had photo-reactive surface manufacture set up.

Once we had recovered, it became noticeable that there was a lack of fresh projects to undertake that were in any way realistically achievable. Boredom and routine

Opposite: The city of gladiators, Kaon

slowly took their toll on the collective mind. Frustrations and thwarted individual ambitions turned in on themselves, and a whole subculture sprang up in which violent entertainments, gambling, and extreme activities of all kinds became the rage. Like attracted like, and what started out as a ragtag assortment of clubs and gatherings quickly expanded and then became dominated by a criminal element, self-organizing around the most profitable of the events—the racetracks, the aerobatics and extreme sports, and, most of all, the gladiatorial pits. Of these last, by far the most popular and lucrative were the death-matches. Conservative bots called for legislation and regulation, appalled by the brutality, but aside from a few shows of a policing presence, nothing was done. The Council knew well by that time that they had nothing to offer in exchange for the thrills and highs that Kaon City, as it became known, could give. To attempt to outlaw it would only drive it farther out of reach. We thought it better to have it out where we could keep an eye on it.

Temperance movements started up, led by bots with passionate ideals about morals, health, and self-preservation, and they also gained a following. But although they initially attempted to sabotage Kaon and pull people from it, ultimately the two sets went in different directions and had little to do with each other, bar slandering back and forth in the daily press. Suicide—previously almost unknown among us—became something notable in the weekly journals that rounded up news from across the planet and brought it to Iacon's door.

The records for the major part of this era—an astonishing age of twenty thousand stellar cycles—reveal a uniformity of dullness, as if the rust had eaten our spirits when it couldn't have our bodies. Here and there, moments of brightness stand out: artists doing significant works, sportbots achieving miraculous feats, that sort of thing. Mostly, however, there is work, and there is a sense of defeated complacent passivity, a resignation leaking out of the annals like molten slag. It makes for a depressing study.

As if it too suffered ennui, the Well of All Sparks slowed down enormously in the formation of new bots. What we had thought slow at the end of the Golden Age was nothing compared to the sporadic creativity it lapsed into by the time the third millennium of rust had passed. Almost exclusively, bots without names began to emerge. Prior to this, the formation process from protoform to adult within the Well's depths had allowed time for the rising individuals to scan information and process it sufficiently that they could choose an identity for themselves, including whatever tag they wished to be known by. Many theories sprang up to account for the complete loss of self-identification, but a questioning of the bots concerned revealed the truth all too clearly—a truth many wanted to deny.

They had simply not found anything that they wanted to be. The options of this repressive social state, with its strictly regulated castes and its limited numbers and opportunities, had stultified their minds so that they emerged, not identical, but similar to one another, and usually in response to the only openings that their growing senses had been able to discern—menial, laboring positions for the most part. They perceived no need for more, did not bother to try for more, because there was no hope of more. They gave themselves designations according to the area they worked in and their type.

In the Council, once we had reviewed this situation, the mood was bleak. We were deteriorating into a race of

mindless operatives, essentially but one step up from the insentient machines we'd made to serve us. These bots without names were living indictments of our stagnant situation. We were devolving.

Soundwave was the most vocal with his anger. "This situation is a travesty! How can we pretend that all bots are equal when clearly they are now being created as much less than individuals? Shall we allow the outdated system of governance by Form and Function to be the ultimate power here—the mindless mechanoid that grinds us all up so we may as well be rust? It cannot continue. There must be immediate change!"

He glared at Sentinel, but his wrath wasn't reserved for him alone. In quieter tones he said, "All day I hear the chatter of a million disillusioned people. The only goals that the lowest caste has are survival or the pitiful glory of a moment in the pits. All their heroes are brutal monstrosities. They have no knowledge of how anything used to be, or what we were . . . they have already forgotten. I will not be a silent witness to this any longer."

He stood. "I won't stand here pretending to be better than those laboring in the mines and the smeltyards. You stand for nothing, now, Sentinel, except death. What is the point of your existence? And you . . ." he fixed each of us at a time. "You wait and make excuses and do nothing to kick his useless tailpipe. The system is your tyrant. You are weak. You are pathetic. It shames me to sit here and listen to your self-justifying prattle month on month. You have had kilocycles, and this is all you have managed. Tell me, what will we do?"

There was an uproar, but it was hot air for the most part. Sentinel sat stone-faced. I made my records, as always. Eventually when everyone had had their say, it transpired that we would do nothing for now. Elita One wanted research and time. Sentinel wanted more reports done. Halogen would study methods of exchanging labor . . . all of it displeased Soundwave mightily.

Above: Soundwave defies the Council

"Research, reports . . . more delays," he snarled. "I am through talking to you. Everything falls on deaf ears. There is no point in speeches; only actions count." With that he threw down his council badge and turned his back, walking out. From that moment forward, to my knowledge, he has not uttered a single word of his own. We later learned that he had taken up a job at a relay station near Kaon City, working shifts and living the life of the lowest caste. No matter who wrote or tried to contact him, he would have nothing more to do with any of us.

Soundwave was right about us. Our bureaucracy had grown massive, into a behemoth we had not noticed. His words and deeds troubled me greatly from that moment on, and I got no rest, thinking on them and feeling the justice at their core. I looked often in those months to Orion Pax, reading and filing, carefully recording. He even had to process the minutes of that fateful meeting. I went to the *Covenant* and opened it far back, to the moment when we had made the Well, so that I could relive the scene and hope to recapture that original flash of inspiration, when there were still Primes, when we still took actions that mattered.

Two facts stood out to me as I studied the text. The first one was that we had never specified exactly what sort of crisis would be sufficient to trigger *Thirteen*'s resurrection. Apparently the cataclysm of the solar pass in the Age of Evolution was not enough, and neither was the invasion of the Quintessons. Now the worst calamity of all seemed to have gripped us, and still there was no sign of his arrival. The majority of Cybertronians only knew fragments of the Prime storyline, and what they put together was half nonsense these days, filled with fancies to make up for what was missing. Almost nobody considered it anything but myth—a handy tale to explain a past so deeply forgotten and incomprehensible that it required a dramatic fabrication to dull the force of its emptiness upon the imagination.

Even to me, it was so long ago that it was more like a dream than a reality. I felt my convictions, untested and enduring for so long, begin to waver. There, on the page, I saw the extent of our foolish bravado in setting the Well. Our hopes so bright, and all that was to come unknown. Such boldness required a better answer than Sentinel being permitted to preside indefinitely over our stasis. He delayed in fear of causing riots.

The truth of the Energon situation was unknown. If he lifted all restrictions, it would immediately become blatantly obvious. The likes of the Razers and the Breakers had not gone away simply because times were hard. Their aggression and the panics would soon bring us all back to tribal savagery. Could. Maybe. And so, Sentinel held his ground and the Council followed, unable to change his mind. The burden of responsibility lay heavily on him. He really believed the fates of all the Cybertronians lay on his shoulders, and he must save them from themselves. In realizing this, I saw that he had come to the end of his faith. Perhaps the Rust had taken it from him. I needed to find something to give him heart.

I closed the *Covenant* and set it carefully aside, then took myself out of Iacon, altforming for the first time in decades, to travel speedily along the roads and channels far from the city. I passed the glowing lights of Six Lasers, and later the shining torus of the Altihex Casino, nobody noticing me much—their focus on travel or their

destinations and the keen anticipation of some much-needed pleasurable diversion. Kaon City was a darkness far out to my left on the horizon. I kept away from it, not wishing anyone to know my own target or even that I had one. I was going to see someone of a very rare kind who was well-known but ultimately almost as much of a mystery as the Prime story itself. He was no Prime, however. He was unique and never seen on the surface unless you knew exactly what you were looking for. It was not until I was far out into the deserts of the aptly named Sea of Rust—a natural eddy spot where the mild winds of the world came to spin and halt and drop their grit—that I left the road and turned into the wastelands.

I worried at first that I might leave a trail, but nobody followed me, and anyway, the vague flurries of air continually stirred my wake in the deep powdery red ochre, so that within an hour of my going, there was no sign I had been there. The dust got everywhere, threatening to seize all my joints, but I persisted and eventually, in a small gully formed by the lee of two dunes, I saw the telltale sign of a fine aerial sticking out of the ground.

If he hadn't been signaling me for the last half cycle, I doubt I would have seen it between all the rickety uprights of the structures left there since the Cataclysm, but once I found it, the dust was suddenly spun and moved aside by something beneath, and from the rust emerged a holoprojector, spinning to free itself. It formed a display of a delicate many-sided polygon in order to give me something to talk to besides the air. The Cybertronian in question remained invisible, his widespread, distributed body extended throughout the skin of Cybertron like the filaments of a fine mold, reaching up to the surface and down into the intimate nervous systems of Primus. I remembered making him, so many Primes working to create a computer capable of interfacing completely with the systems of Primus and the structures created above him, an artificial intelligence that was so close to being alive we couldn't have said if it was, yes or no. He served us as a processor, a repository, a thoughtful analyst, but had thoughts of his own, though I don't know what they were.

I greeted him warmly, this strange medium between the rest of us and Cybertron's still-living core. "Vector Sigma, thank you for meeting me at such short notice."

"Alpha Trion." His geometric avatar bobbed gently, always quietly spoken and polite. "Your message was intriguing. In the circumstances, I felt myself bound to answer you."

"If anyone would know of the continued survival of such instruments, it would be you."

"The Matrix of Leadership. Yes. I know of it, and where it is. And other articles, though I cannot release all of them, as they are bound to Primus's will and their own."

"I need something to galvanize the will of the people, of the Council," I said, "to inspire and challenge them. Doubt and hesitation fill them, and they lack all conviction. You of all people must know the crisis we are in. The Well . . ."

He nodded. He was connected directly and intimately to the Well and had some influence upon it, although how much none of us knew for certain. "The Nameless Ones. Yes. But the lack of new Sparks is, as you suspect, related to the Energon remaining here. Population must not outstrip survivability. You're going to use the old artefacts to draw a new Age upon us?"

"Not me!" I said hastily, feeling his gaze burn with curiosity. "I simply think it is time we, the Council, collectively offered some new hope to prevent the decline, if nothing else."

"I think you have more upon your mind," Vector Sigma said, his voice as soft as the dust. "But I share your fears for our future. It has been much in my thoughts. . . ." And what he meant by "mind" was, again, different from ours because of his form. He regulated and interpreted so much, this intermediary between us and our environment, part shaman, part vast, multiple consciousness. "Wait here." He vanished beneath the surface for a time, even his aerial gone. I waited as the night fell. It grew very cold, and a fine frost grew upon the rust before he returned. A hand-sized, flat object seemed to push itself up out of the sands at my feet. I bent down and took it. "This is a token for Sentinel," he said. "It was mine, it is . . ."

But I knew what it was of course, even though I had not seen it for countless millennia. "The Badge of Vector Prime."

To hold it now was like holding a sacred relic, though I could remember seeing Vector Prime wearing it, part of his natural armor. . . . I remembered light flashing off it as he powered into battle against Unicron, time and space warping around him with flares of brilliant astral light. For a moment I longed to see him. I thanked Vector Sigma and put the Badge away. He could not pass over the Matrix, but he would give us this token of favor. To have even this symbolic gift meant a lot.

"The Matrix itself is here on Cybertron," Vector Sigma informed me, "but it will reveal itself in time."

"Don't suppose you know when that would be?" I asked him.

"No," he said. Then his voice took on a deeper timbre, a strange resonance, as if another being spoke inside it with him, guiding his words, adding weight to his intent. "But if you think that it will bring with it a new Golden Age, or one to surpass that, I urge caution to your dreams. The Matrix is an object of immense power, and although it will permit itself to be used only by those who are worthy, there are many who would seize it. You were always the essence of balance, Alpha Trion; don't forget that most of the world is not like you. Remain true to who you are. Weigh all sides."

For a moment, a brief moment, I thought it was Primus himself—perhaps only because he'd said what I needed to hear. I thanked him again, and he assured me of his willingness to help. Then we parted, and I made the slow journey across the shifting morass alone.

UNSEEN ENGINES

Once in Iacon, I studied the Badge a while for sentimental reasons, wondering at what power it had, if any, beyond the significance of its symbol. It gleamed silently in my hands, and I could divine nothing. I hoped that Sentinel Prime would understand that it was meant as a sign the time was ripe for action, boldness, and forward thinking—this was a gift from powers of ancient ages, an omen of luck from the master of time and space—but I prepared a speech in which to tell him, just in case he was reluctant to accept the truth. Before making the journey to present it to him, I sat down to record my thoughts and

Opposite: Vector Sigma gives Alpha Trion a token of hope in the wilderness

observations in the *Covenant*, as usual. The Badge lay on the open page beside me as I picked up the Quill and began to write.

The Quill felt odd in my hand that night. I put it down to the proximity of the other object as I wrote my concerns, my hopes . . . but then, as I concluded my personal notes alongside the official record of events, the Quill seemed to vibrate in a peculiar manner, as if shaken by a tiny internal quake . . . and continued to do so as I finished my line. It disturbed me enormously, causing the symbols to malform somewhat, and I frowned, reading back my sentence. ". . . Something must occur for *Thirteen* to awaken. But what? It must be soon. It is desperately needed. If not now, then *when*?"

Then the *Covenant* responded, absorbing the symbols as it sometimes did. The Quill shook, and what it had written seemed to burn for a minute with an odd transmission spark between it, myself, and the book. Symbols appeared with rapid ease across and down the page, covering the paper and my own marks in a burst of expression. The Badge hummed lightly, and I realized then that whatever was going on was drawing some power from it. I picked it up, and it shocked me with a jolt so hard I dropped it instantly back into the gutter of the book. I tried to read the marks, but they came and went with flashing speed, rewriting and overwriting each other in a dizzying fashion so that I could pick out only single words or phrases. On they flowed, sign on sign, symbol on symbol, weaving themselves into the fabric of the pages in vast tapestries of light. The Quill thrummed, white-hot now with the force of the energies rushing through it. The Badge lay, singeing a permanent burn mark of its outline onto the book.

". . . catalytic reaction . . ."

". . . for every protagonist an equal and an opposite . . ."

". . . wake him by the movement of his own heart . . ."

And there was so much that was esoteric and strange that it was beyond my ability to express adequately—it spoke of brothers, souls, spirits, dancing, the flow of power from pole to pole and frequency to frequency, of fundamental uncertainties in all things that tore apart and made whole. . . . And then, just as I felt on the brink of understanding, a final symbol fled out from the Quill into the paper—the sign that says always "Let it be." And then the thread connecting me to the objects was gone.

The Quill lay inert. The Badge was cool and silent. The paper was quite blank again.

I wasn't sure what I'd done. Had I written into the future of the book? I hadn't realized that was even possible, but something in the turn of fate had certainly changed. Something was underway. I studied the pages and discerned within their heavy texture the remnants of coded signs as though whatever was there lay buried in the structure itself.

Even though I waited a long time, no answer came, and nothing else happened. I put the *Covenant* away eventually and took the Badge to Sentinel Prime.

It was not until I heard the name of a gladiator from the pits of Kaon, attached to a rallying cry for revolution, that a cold shiver of recognition ran down my spine and connected my mind to the day I had given the Badge to Sentinel Prime.

Opposite: Megatron awakens to his true role

"Who is this 'Megatron'!?" he thundered, the Badge shining on his breast, as the Council was faced with the sudden appearance of this new character from an unexpected quarter.

They all studied the reports and debated their responses as I sat, frozen with a sudden conviction. I excused myself as soon as I was able and went to the Archives, opening the *Covenant* before I sat down. There it was, in perfectly clear language where it had been blank before.

"Alpha Trion took the recordings made by the gladiator, Megatron, and directed them for safekeeping to the hands of his assistant, Orion Pax. . . ."

The future, written as if it were already the past.

I did as it said, fearful I had already done far too much in this.

D-16 had gone into the mines as allotted, way back in the Quintesson Imperium, but had just lately come to take part in the fighting in the city of Kaon and become an unsurpassed competitor of relentless power. No bot could beat him. His chosen name: Megatronus, which the cheering crowds had shortened to Megatron.

And the choice of such a name could be no accident, surely? This bot was of the line of Megatronus. He was, at heart, born to revolt. I had asked for a catalyst, a spur—and now I saw the most piercing spur I could have imagined. He must have stepped forward to give his name only hours after I had seen the words of the Quill vanish into the *Covenant*'s pages. A chill ran over me, but until this day I have not mentioned the facts of this to another living being. I feared to, in case I had not recorded history, but directed it. Memories of Maximo's death sprang to my mind, but I cannot say now I was not destiny's agent, here or back then. I studied the book but no further instruction came from the *Covenant*.

I passed on continuing news about the Kaon situation to Orion Pax, and he worked through it all diligently. One day I saw him set out purposefully with his friend, Jazz, in the direction of Kaon City. When he returned, he was full of questions and thought. I saw that he was sympathetic to, as well as critical of, Megatron's views. He was attracted to him, like a magnet to iron, finding at last a great and pressing interest, as well as a challenge. There was a time when they seemed so close they were like brothers, but always Megatron's nature and Orion Pax's struggled against each other for all their shared ideals. One was establishment and for order and peace; the other craved supremacy and competition. They were the classic split between one who saw the benefit of all as a cooperative effort of equality, and one who saw natural justice in the rise and command of the fittest.

It was when Megatron made his first terrorist action that he and Orion Pax split irrevocably. In his rash decisions and the pain that drove him, I saw the echo of his ancestor, the Fallen, and I wondered who would die now to serve his need to prove the truth of his strength and determination, his willingness to do the dirty deeds that change seemed to require of him. History, unknown to those in the present, is doomed to repeat itself, and that may be even more true for us as we are formed in such a few basic molds. Those molds do not change over time, their structures always the same, and no matter how long we function, we rarely change in any significant

Opposite: The crowd chants Megatron's name as the gladiator wins another bout

way either. Ironic for a race that prides itself on its shape-shifting.

My hope for the future lay in the fact that it was never the Fallen and the ancestor of Pax who had come to blows. Pax's nature was only to oppose Megatron's excesses because he threatened the liberty of others. He had no desire to lead or marshal forces for his own glorification. He was, as his name fragment suggests, a peacemaker, and he tried for a long time to persuade Megatron to calmer and less violent methods of achieving his goals. Megatron wavered because he genuinely seemed to like Orion Pax and considered him an equal, but in the end he fell back to all that he knew and trusted, namely himself. He could never give over even a sliver of power to another being, no matter how kindly meant they were toward him. It is his greatest weakness.

As it turned out, the more that Megatron gained supporters and fomented his revolutionary party under the banner of "the Decepticons"—so Orion Pax became his opponent naturally and came to call his allies "the Autobots." Both names stood for the same thing against the spirit of the Age of Rust, which was Stasis. They stood for individual freedom, one self-declared and quiet, the other a defiant insurrection demanding mass recognition. It is the method, not the form, that differs, then as now.

THE FINAL BREAK

The action that Sentinel Prime and the Council finally took during their special session was the one that precipitated the civil war. Orion Pax and Megatron were both present when Halogen made the address. The chamber itself—a vast room made in the stylized shape of a Spark, with radiating arms and vast galleries reaching to the heights—was packed with as many Cybertronians as had been able to lever themselves into the space. Its usual echoing silences were filled with a constant susurrus of whispers, clinks, and rustles, which they still made even when trying their hardest to be quiet. Halogen stood proudly at the podium, looking nervous, perhaps, Contrail at his shoulder, and the other council members arrayed toward the back.

"The Matrix of Leadership is on Cybertron," Halogen announced, summing up a long-winded preparation, which had, Orion Pax now realized, led to this moment alone. Beside him, Megatron growled softly, his patience checked only by the occasion and his conviction that something satisfying was about to take place. Orion Pax knew well what the Matrix of Leadership was, although until just now he'd thought it part of a story from long ago, even though there were expeditions out in search of it all the time.

Halogen continued. "According to the archivist Alpha Trion, it may be found in these turbulent times, and the leader to whom it gifts its powers will be the Prime who will lead all Cybertronians through to a new age."

Megatron twitched. The air stilled.

"Orion Pax, upon you we place the quest for the Matrix of Leadership," Halogen said. "From this moment forward you are Optimus Prime. . . ."

Orion Pax didn't hear the rest. He looked across the length of the hall to Alpha Trion, searching to see if he had known—thinking he must have known this was going

Opposite: Megatron turns against Optimus Prime in the great council chamber of Iacon

to happen—and at the same time he had the strangest sensation, like a memory, that he had been called this before . . . .

He knew he must do something to bridge the gap they had made between him and Megatron in this moment and turned to him, "Brother, I did not seek this. . . ."

But Megatron was having nothing to do with it. He mocked Optimus openly, calling him a clerk, the new autocrat set to administer paperwork and bureaucracy in the same old stranglehold. Only Optimus was close enough to see the hurt that precipitated the backlash. "Brothers no more!" Megatron spat and continued his tirade, declaring, "You have betrayed the ideals you professed to me from the first!"

Within moments the entire chamber had erupted into a guns-drawn showdown, supporters of both sides bristling and eyeing each other, Decepticons and Autobots declaring themselves loudly in shouts that tried to drown each other out. The Elite guard rushed forward, weapons trained on Megatron, but Optimus waved them down. In his own anger when Megatron refused to see his side, he swore to oppose the Decepticons, and that was how they parted.

The Decepticons were permitted to leave freely, but that was the end of any friendship between Optimus Prime and Megatron.

Only the look on Optimus's face, the crushing disappointment, made me think twice as he watched them go. He was sad for Megatron. I could not say I wasn't, as I sat with the rest of the Council and felt the burdens of the age leaving me. We were finished as a ruling entity, Sentinel Prime wasgrateful in the end, I think. To choose Megatron would have been to select his favored "benevolent" tyranny, though Megatron was never benevolent unless surrounded by obedience, and he never saw the irony in that and how it flouted his ideals.

He stalked from the meeting with his triumvirate of hatred consolidated. His rivalry with Optimus Prime was foremost in his mind, but it was backed up strongly by Optimus's relation to Sentinel Zeta Prime, the figurehead at whose feet he laid all responsibility for the lengthy oppression of the Cybertronian people and who had, in his view, personally sentenced him from the first minute of his life to slavery in the mines. The final portion of his wrath was reserved for the Quintessons. For them, should he ever meet them (and he planned to, just as soon as Cybertron was settled), he was ready to provide an absolute and individually tailored hell. His loathing was comprehensive and more than energy enough to ignite his revolution. He ramped up to war in a spirit of unadulterated vengeance.

Orion Pax . . . well, he was what he was. There was never any question about to whom the Matrix of Leadership would eventually fall, from the moment he leaped into the Well at the end of the first era, all those millions of stellar cycles ago, igniting it and beginning the entire Cybertronian dynasty. He had never consciously been aware of it, for all his long, long life, but he was Optimus Prime. He was *Thirteen*.

Megatron's outrage would never be contained.

Opposite: Orion Pax comes into his own as Optimus Prime

THE GREAT WAR

After war was openly declared between the Autobots, seeking peaceful revolution from within, and the Decepticons, wanting to smash all traces of the old order and any opposition, the stark choice facing all Cybertronians was to pick a side. At the outset, the shock of the change meant that many hedged their bets, declaring nothing until they were forced to by invasion of their territory. Since this invasion was mostly undertaken by Decepticon forces looking to grab strategic strongholds or resources, the would-be neutrals and a good few (but too few) Autobot sympathizers found the choice reduced to Decepticon or death. Most chose Decepticon.

Some of the smarter ones did so in bad faith, giving lip service to the cause, while planning to do what they could to subvert it from within. One such was Jetfire. He and Starscream, another aerial bot whose duty had been the air safety of the great cities, faced the stark proposition that was to become commonplace across Cybertron on the first morning of formal hostilities. Both of them had served alongside each other for long years, both in the Golden Age and through the Age of Rust. They were united by a desire to return to the Golden Age's prosperity and freedoms, although Starscream harbored dreams of becoming Prime. Jetfire suspected there wasn't a bot alive who didn't have some dreams of that nature, but he was no leader, and like Starscream, was wary of swearing allegiance early.

At the outset of war, both of them found themselves assigned to personal guard duty for Sentinel Prime, while the rest of the High Council had other soldiers brought out for their protection. Even I, Alpha Trion, had Smokescreen attached to me for the duration—a position neither of us relished at first; me because I disliked a shadow, and he because his feisty spirit found itself inside a library where he had to pretend he didn't exist.

As Cybertron descended into chaos and violence, we continued with a foolish degree of "life as usual," which found Starscream at the Altihex Casino one notable night, attending a comedy evening as Sentinel Prime's guard. The High Council had assumed, fatally, that even after the defection of Contrail and Ratbat from their number to Megatron's cause, the rest of the council and their troop would remain loyally neutral or Autobot-sympathizers. We didn't consider how many dissatisfied Sparks would use the opportunities to bid for power.

When Megatron attacked, in the middle of Armorhide's celebrated set about "Rusticons," and Sentinel chose to escape assassination instead of standing his ground, he put the final bolt into his coffin, as far as Starscream was concerned. Starscream defected on the spot and had the Seekers imprison Sentinel at Kaon Prison as Megatron's star prize, buying himself instantly into Megatron's power elite. It was a terrible, fatal turning point, although we were slow to realize it. Starscream and the Air Command were privy to planet-wide security secrets, and he wasted little time in handing these over to Megatron. In particular, he revealed the nature of the Trypticon structure.

Opposite: The Autobots construct the Ark

Megatron took and used Dark Energon immediately. I suppose it is fitting that Starscream, in his needy hubris, became the slave of that substance as much as his own ego. A bot after Liege Maximo's pattern, he could not resist pursuing fate wherever it looked the most advantageous at any moment in time. But he was not of Maximo's caliber. He lacked conviction at the last. He would only ever serve others.

Jetfire knew this of Starscream, but he still found the betrayal hard to swallow. There was nothing he could do to mitigate the damage of Starscream's tattling. But he could still go to attempt a rescue of Sentinel Prime, and he did so, led by Optimus Prime, while the rest of us rapidly formulated plans for the preservation of other hidden artefacts and objects of power. As the struggle to liberate Sentinel Prime and to seize the Dark Energon concealed inside Trypticon went on, we scrambled to find usable starships of any kind, however unworthy, and refit them for what would probably be desperate one-way transits to a variety of destinations known only to Vector Sigma and me. I did not even enter a record of our activities into Teletraan-1, which had served me faithfully since it was built.

Although intelligent, Teletraan-1 was still only a programmed machine, and it had never been fitted with codes for war. Any Cybertronian was free to search it for information on any subject and find answers—under one rule this had seemed egalitarian and wise. Now it was a foolish liberalism. While the fitting of the ships got under way at the Autobot yards, I had to begin the process of attempting to lock up and encode sensitive

Right: Jetfire went against most other Seekers to join the Autobots
Opposite: Starscream threw in with Megatron and succumbed to the power of Dark Energon
Following: Metroplex stands with the Autobots against the Decepticons

data. Sadly, I couldn't do the same to individuals. It was difficult to remain calm. I referred often to the pages of the *Covenant*, looking for instruction, but it said nothing about the play of power that the war had unleashed. It could go anybody's way. The pivotal moments of decision and hesitation upon which the fate of the world turned were all unpredictable, probabilities fanning out endlessly, meshed and entwined.

We secured the Star Saber, the Apex Armor, and those pieces of the Blades of Time that were in our possession, along with the Omega Keys, before we ran out of time. Alas, this "security" meant jettisoning the precious objects on unaccompanied craft disguised as meteors, plotted and fueled sufficiently to reach the nearest planets of note, which happened to be Earth, Velocitron, and the accumulated heap named Junkion. Someone slipped rumors of the activity to the Decepticons, igniting their interest in relics they had only heard of in ancient story, but too late to notice the shipments.

Megatron turned his attention to the Plasma Chamber that was held within Teletraan-1 instead, and, thanks to Starscream's intel, acquired the keys to that without much effort. The first lay where it had been placed in the Hall of Justice, and the other had been concealed within the chest cavity of Sentinel Zeta Prime. Megatron murdered him to take it, thinking the keys would simply open Cybertron's heart. Instead he discovered that they awoke the tender mercy of Omega Supreme, one of the Autobots' few truly giant powers. He emerged, a silver and vengeful angel, from the surface of the Tagan Heights, destroying the flimsy structures of factories and homes as they poured off his back in a river of shattered metal. His engines melted everything within a two-hundred-metron radius

into glowing white liquid and boiling vapor. Megatron's extinction was his goal. A ferocious fight ensued.

Omega Supreme was defeated, shot down by relentless fire from Starscream and his flying soldiers. He crashed back through the surface, broken, and for a brief period, Megatron gained access to Cybertron's core and attempted to convert it to the antithesis of life—Dark Energon. Once begun, the chain reaction progressed

at an alarming rate, the golden gleam of Primus's life energy altered to the sickly purple glow of the chaotic form. With renewed determination, the Autobots rallied around Optimus, unwilling to give in to despair even in this darkest moment. Distracted by the sense of their early victory, the Decepticons were unprepared for what happened next.

Knowing he must do something quickly to prevent the Dark Energon's progress through Primus's core, Optimus called to the citadel itself, to Iacon. Perhaps even he did not know what would happen, for it was a surprise to all

when, block by block, Iacon itself resumed a protoform of a size never equaled upon the surface of Cybertron—our beloved home was a titan who dwarfed even Omega Supreme. Metroplex arose to answer the Prime's call and smote enough of the assaulting army to buy Optimus time to reach the core and destroy the Dark Energon reserve flowing into Primus's ancient heart.

Above: The Matrix of Leadership

But the damage had been done. Primus spoke directly to Optimus from the depths of his Spark chamber, as he had not since we were all created, millions of years before. Optimus stood before the massive armored sphere of Primus's heart and watched as its glowing light intensified and an aperture on the surface of the shielding slowly irised open.

"My Spark has become corrupted. In order to purge myself of this taint I must shut down. Cybertron will become a cold and barren planet for that time, and it may be millions of cycles before I am able to return."

"So we must leave Cybertron." Optimus was already resigned to his burden.

"I offer a portion of my Spark to take with you, for as long as it survives, so shall I. Will you accept this responsibility, Optimus Prime?"

Optimus agreed, and the Matrix of Leadership unfolded from the chamber's opened core, a creation of hard light filled with all the knowledge of the Thirteen Primes, including his own long-lost legacy. It installed itself beside his own Spark chamber, in the center of his chest. In that moment, the whole long cycle of the Primes came full circle.

Optimus stood in the silent core of the world and knew the whole truth of himself and where he was for the first time. He knew who I was, what had happened to all the others, each of their own personal stories that even I did not know—things only their Sparks knew. For a moment he bowed his head in humble recognition of all that had passed and what it had meant. A great calm came over him. The torment that had bothered him always, about his worthiness, about Megatron's story and his part in it—these things left him. With the steady

determination and compassion that was ever his after that moment, he commanded me to oversee the construction of an Ark in which the Autobots could safely travel. I was glad to agree, for although much had been lost, I felt hope such as I had not felt since that day we set forth as one to battle Unicron: the day of our victory and our loss.

That was not the end for Cybertron's inhabitants, however. Fierce battles raged in a largely one-sided contest in which pockets of Autobots scrambled to hold the only advantages we could. Metroplex did not survive his mighty stand. His last act was to return his Spark to the core, adding its clean Energon to Primus's struggling defenses. His altform remains, a blasted area that one day may be rebuilt, but for now is only his tomb. Nearly everything else either went to Decepticon control or was razed to slag and scrap by the fury of the fighting. The uncounted dead lay where they fell by the millions. The losses were comparable in their unrelenting climb to the early days of the Cataclysm, but I felt so much worse knowing that we had done this to ourselves. All that we had endured proudly through the Quintesson invasion and the Age of Rust was now laid waste in a fraction of time by the furious savagery unleashed by Megatron's merciless, thwarted ambition. He would have his "true" Golden Age, at any price.

Besides the obvious, significant victories for the Decepticons in major arenas, and our occasional fortunate victory, there were also many apparently more minor incidents upon which individual fates turned.

One such involved one of the last warriors to be created by the Well in the final days of the Age of Rust, just before it became virtually silent at the onset of hostilities. His name was Bumblebee, and he was from the start an immediate, natural Autobot defender who moved quickly into Optimus Prime's elite group, alongside Ironhide, Jazz, Prowl, and Ratchet. Because he was so young compared to the others, they had a tendency to think of him as the little brother, something he both enjoyed and played up to. The war and their natures made strong bonds between them of a kind rarely seen in peacetime; call it brotherhood then, the closest Cybertronians can get when they are not related in the same ways that other creatures can be. Bumblebee's moment of heroism and its result caused much anguish in the others, even though they all had equally difficult and dangerous parts to play in the endgame around Iacon.

FLOAT LIKE A BUTTERFLY

Bumblebee lay where he'd been thrown and watched Megatron stalk off until his swagger took him out of sight. The shock of having his voice box crushed eclipsed all other injuries. He could still feel the agonizing grip around his throat, the merciless press of Megatron's fingers and the implacable strength of the arm pinning him helplessly in the air. Even so, he was glad of everything he'd done, and said. It was a sense of wry victory that kept him down on the deck as much as the pain and the damage to his leg. His job was done, and he had succeeded. Megatron had been thoroughly distracted while Optimus and the others went to rescue Sentinel. Even his brief pleasure in destroying Bumblebee's voice and gloating over his humiliation would soon turn to impotent rage when he learned of what had happened,

and that made 'Bee laugh, although only a raspy nothingness of a voice came out. He sounded like a dying combustion cylinder. He even found that kind of funny at the time, but it hurt to laugh.

He knew the Decepticons were gone when he heard the rushing tread of feet coming and the familiar sounds of a cranky, put-out Ratchet reforming straight into lecture mode. "Don't you think you've overdone it this time?" There was no mistaking the worried edge in his voice, though, as he bent down to examine 'Bee's vital signs.

'Bee wanted to say, "Quit fussing, old-timer!" He tried to say it, thoughtlessly, but static and peeps were all that emerged. Instead, he had to gesture with his good arm and try to express the same sentiment. However, Ratchet didn't get it at all.

"Servos shot up as well, huh? Look at this. You're lucky to be alive, kid." His reproving remarks continued with every fresh injury he discovered as he rapidly applied first aid.

'Bee felt stung and attempted to wave off the fussing and get up, more alarmed than he wanted to show at the strange intensity of Ratchet's worrying. Ratchet could be boring, but he was relentlessly levelheaded, and to see him so upset was odd. It meant something must be really wrong.

Ratchet pushed him back down with a strength 'Bee didn't expect, so forceful it made him pay attention. "Hold still. You got scraplets in your crankcase? I can't fix anything if you start cavorting." He muttered some unpleasant things about Megatron, interspersed with a commentary to himself on what he was doing. "Gotta get this cut off . . . there. . . . Now we can do the rest at the base. Patch it for now. Let's see that neck of yours . . ."

'Bee wanted to grumble, but for some reason he daren't. Ratchet just stared at his throat and was utterly silent. In the background they could both hear cannonfire and overhead the sudden screeching roar of a Seeker passing on a low reconnaissance.

"I wonder if I . . ." Ratchet murmured, and 'Bee felt some tiny instrument being used. It did not hurt; there was only a sense of pressure. Suddenly his voice box hissed of it's own accord, and there was a nasty, sparking fizz that made Ratchet swear and recoil. A line of smoke and a burned smell followed. Ratchet just stared. Finally, he said in an oddly choked way, "Right, on your feet, soldier, lean on me, we're heading out."

They returned to the safety of Iacon and the surgical facility. After hours of effort, Ratchet finally laid down his instrument case and turned off the overhead lights. He walked to Bumblebee's side and looked at him solemnly. "Your leg's going to be fine. But I . . . can't do anything to fix your voice box. Not now. Maybe not ever."

Bumblebee looked back at the old bot who had become his friend. He was shocked and couldn't hide it. He'd thought there was nothing Ratchet couldn't fix. It never occurred to him, even as Megatron was doing it, that he might not recover. He felt suddenly a bit foolish, although he still wouldn't have changed anything. He wanted to tell Ratchet, to stop the grim look of self-blame spreading and making him so heavy and defeated, but without words he didn't know how. He put his hand up onto Ratchet's familiar white and red arm and looked him in the eye, willing him to see that it was not his fault.

Opposite: Ratchet attempts to repair Bumblebee's torn throat on the battlefield

But Ratchet took it as pleading. "I've tried everything I can think of. I'm sorry. I don't think it can be mended this side of a miracle."

Bumblebee frowned as Ratchet turned away. The older bot saw this and sighed heavily. Bumblebee thumped the table he lay on in frustration and sat up. He wanted to tell Ratchet that he was as close to a miracle worker as anyone he'd ever seen. He could even walk now, and an hour before his leg was useless. But pointing and gestures made no difference. Ratchet couldn't seem to understand anything, and his insistence on taking the blame made 'Bee angry. But he couldn't even express that without Ratchet thinking it was rage at him.

Over the next cycles, as his silence became well-known, and his occasional attempts at speech met with raised eyebrows, Bumblebee found himself becoming less frustrated around the rest of his friends. He'd loved the chat and the friendship before, and he did miss being able to join in, but the thing he most feared—that he'd be overlooked—never happened. Everyone treated him

Above: Bumblebee adapts to silence

just like they did before, and his being silent meant that even hardcase Ironhide and dour Prowl started to confide in him now and again. To Optimus himself, Bumblebee showed the same eager obedience to fight and serve as before, and he came to realize that he'd lost nothing in losing his voice. In fact, he'd gained a greater sense of security in his position with them. They accepted and wanted him as he was. Before, always pushing any worries about his youth and inexperience aside with banter, he could never have known this. He had gone from brash, noisy 'Bee to quiet, watchful 'Bee, floating through all kinds of talks where people would say things they wouldn't have said otherwise. He felt that he was among equals, and belonged.

In idle moments, he wished he could tell Megatron what a good turn he'd done. That would be about a minute before he wanted to blow Megatron back to the Spark, of course. Bumblebee threw himself into combat with renewed vigor. He wanted to demonstrate to Ratchet above all that he had come to no harm, but Ratchet's perfectionism and his sense of failure didn't lift. Like heavy weather they clouded around the older bot whenever he and Bumblebee were alone, monitoring battle or during 'Bee's first-aid classes. Finally, when they were alone together after patching up the last gunshot wound in a soldier and seeing him stagger out of the door and back to his post, 'Bee spelled it out in letters he constructed from field dressings—*Not Your Fault.* He pointed at the signs and then at his neck, then gave Ratchet the thumbs-up sign to show he was just fine.

Ratchet looked and hesitated. "I think maybe if only I hadn't been so eager on the field, I could have saved part of it."

Bumblebee shook his head and scrambled to make another word out, fast—*Friends.*

Ratchet looked at the clumsily made word, and for a moment Bumblebee thought it wasn't enough, but then Ratchet nodded, and the traces of a smile moved across his face. He was still sad, and he was eternally preoccupied and to 'Bee's mind, grumpy, but that was OK. That was just what Ratchet was like. At least he wasn't sad about the voice thing anymore.

Ultimately, the Autobots faced defeat on Cybertron. We were outnumbered and outgunned. The Decepticons were able to deploy so many soldiers, even massive Combiners like Devastator, whose attacks could only be held back by the battle-hardened valor of Ultra Magnus and the Wreckers. We could not hide behind the Wreckers and our few other elite fighters forever. The day would soon come when Megatron took Iacon and gained control of it, all its contents, and the Well of All Sparks. Seeing this outcome as a certainty, Optimus Prime took the decision that the Well could not be allowed to fall into the hands of the Decepticons.

The AllSpark was jettisoned from the planet and cast into space. The Autobots' only hope of regenerating the world was to pursue the Spark and keep it from the Decepticons. To that end, I put all I could into the construction of the Ark, though it was made from scrap, and I longed for the presence of the other Primes in those days and nights when the welding torches flickered lonely in the dark. Amalgamous, Alchemist, Solus—what a ship *you* could have made, my brothers! But I had to make what I could, and no bots spared themselves in the effort.

The camaraderie, the closeness, the bonds between us then were closer than they had ever been.

I watched the construction, noting its details in the *Covenant*, reading my way into this new and dark future that waited for me here on an abandoned world, while the Autobots feverishly prepared the tiny fleet in which they would make their exit.

When Optimus Prime came to offer me a place on his mission, as I had known he would, I respectfully declined. I explained it was my job to stay—the *Covenant* and the Quill were my uniquely Cybertronian business. Smokescreen and Vector Sigma, along with the loyal Wreckers, were capable of preserving us dregs of civilization from whatever remained of the Decepticons, who, without Megatron's plans to drive them, were unlikely to find any of us of interest. Megatron would certainly stay on Optimus's tail, so all immediate dangers went with the tiny Autobot forces into the great dark of space.

He asked me if I had advice for him, hopeful, but again I said no. I hoped—how can I put this without sounding like an old fool? I hoped that the chase, the distance, the alterations that must surely come with rebirth and the opening of a new era could help Optimus find a new and better way forward than anything exemplified in the past. The original Thirteen Primes were successful in their task of stalling Unicron, though to do more was beyond us. We were, most of us, much too fierce to survive a peace.

Buoyed by *Thirteen*'s faith in the possibility of creativity and growth, we Primes had created all that came after us, and now our creations stood revealed, after they had been through the great proving ground of history. . . . They were as flawed and as precariously balanced as we had ever been, all of us swayed into hopes of better futures by our own illusions and needs, foxed in our lofty ambitions by the pleasure we took in combat and competition of every kind.

It was indeed a foolish hope to think that Optimus might step free of our condition in stepping so far from home, but I needed to believe in him, and so I chose to give him no advice, only my vote of confidence and my approval without hesitation. This gave him some freedom from the past, I hoped.

Vector Sigma, Smokescreen, myself, and those Wreckers who had chosen to remain behind in our defense rather than travel with the voyagers, watched the others leave in silence from the clear space atop the High Council tower. With the glow from the Well now a darkened pit, our few selves alone against the failing light made a sorry picture, so full of hope for the Ark's success, so fearful as we waited and witnessed the inevitable surge of Megatron's ship, the Nemesis, in pursuit. I suppose at least we should have been grateful it was merely his vessel now and not Trypticon himself anymore—his dread intelligence was reduced to nullity by the master he had chosen. One must be grateful for small mercies.

It was only later that we discovered mercy was in short supply. Megatron had left Shockwave behind as custodian of Cybertron's remains.

Shockwave was a unique creature to whom the adherence to logic was more of a fetish than itself being logical—he'd abide by its dictates even against his own best interests, and certainly against those of anyone else.

Opposite: The Wreckers stand off against the Decepticons who remain on Cybertron

Better thought of as a cultist in a cult of one than a pure rationalist, he had an exceptionally astute scientific bent and the curiosity to fuel it indefinitely. Although he'd enjoyed Megatron's attention, I believe he would have followed anyone who would put him in the position of power he craved, with the facilities and the will to tinker to his warped heart's content with the biology and form of others. Thanks to the war, he had an ample supply of Autobot prisoners upon whom to experiment. He would make many monstrosities of them over the coming years, a group we would come to know as the Forged. Alas, most of them did not retain sufficient sanity to reclaim their lives after they were altered, and they remained Shockwave's mind-slaves. However, this was not true of them all.

A GLITCH IN TIME

Shockwave, disappointed by the destruction of so many useful buildings, spent time sending Decepticon faithful throughout the remnants of the old world in search of any useful materials or power sources. He had not been permitted to retain any of the Dark Energon—that Megatron had taken with him aboard the Nemesis—so he was reduced to other forms of experimentation and design. Fortunately, in spite of the near-total devastation, he was able to find a lot of very valuable scrap. He made himself a laboratory, holding cells, pens, arenas, and some accommodations at the higher levels as rewards for those who remained loyal. Prisoners and the disloyal were lined up in the pens. It was very tidy and orderly, as he liked it.

For a time he amused himself with the remodeling of various bots, practicing his techniques for limb removal and transposition, for neural surgery, and for patching. He discovered techniques for bolting bots down so they could not move at all, even when conscious, since it was much faster and more revealing work to operate that way. Those who did not survive vivisection he attempted to use as grafts for others, but try as he might, he could not instill life in a bot once the Spark had gone out. Eventually, he gave up this line of research and concentrated on what he was good at—making altforms that had never existed before.

During his early research, he had managed to get some use out of the single working space bridge, and although he did not have the power to transit with it, he was well able to use it to search for life elsewhere in the hopes of finding inspiration. He sought creatures of extremes, ruthless predators his favorites, the kind of creatures that inspired awe even in a being as clearly driven by reason and logic as he was. In fact, the more mindlessly brutal and rapacious they were, the more they excited him. So when he located Cretaceous Earth, the Bridge as twisted in time as it was in space by his fooling with the controls, he twitched with delight. He had saved a special selection of bots exactly for this moment: the Lightning Strike Coalition, Autobots of ferocious

Opposite: The Nemesis pursues the Ark
Above: Shockwave's laboratory tower, surrounded by Insecticon experiments

warrior credentials who would be improved upon only by something so primordially vicious as the dinosaurs.

He worked first as a test on the least promising individual. As with all his creations, he switched off his auditory centers so that he did not have to hear the screams, complaints, and insults, nor the names, of which "torturing scum" was the least. He had found himself oddly squeamish sometimes when it came to names, as if being named made what he was doing somehow distasteful. Not listening was simply easier and allowed him the peace he required to do his best work. By the end of a reforging, most bots had forgotten their original names and took the ones that he gave them, or made ones for themselves. He felt good then—knowing he'd made something genuinely new. In an effort to assure them that he was not some mad idiot tinkering for no purpose, he would offer them in exchange a running commentary on what he was doing, so that they could appreciate his efforts.

It took many cycles of hard labor. He even had to make an entirely new machine capable of force replicating patterns from messy biological samples into Cybertronian CNA mechanics. The process required the repeated use of high-energy interference lasers at frequencies just shy of those that would have shivered the subjects into their component atoms, but he persevered nobly, sacrificing where he must for the sake of completion.

"You see, I had to gain some power in order to really optimize your altform, Grimlock," he explained patiently as he detached various unimportant parts of Grimlock's neural network.

He was not really cruel, he knew, it was simply that their piffling minds could not understand his purpose, and their resistance caused them anguish and pain. With Grimlock like this he felt so kind now. Yes, he was being magnificently, truly kind, and tenderness filled him so that he tried to explain, futile as it was.

"Now, I know what you're saying—you'll be less of a bot without your intelligence in the altform and yes, perhaps, but you and I both know you were never the sharpest vibroblade in the rack. Believe me, it will all be worth it once you take your tyrannosaur form up and make it your own. None of the beasts I saw required any brain at all to successfully dominate the landscape! I am

sure it will be the same for you. In addition, you will keep all Cybertronian abilities you had before, and, as a special treat for you, my finest work, I give you a breath of fire. That makes you even superior to the hulks from which I have made you. You can't say fairer than that, I think. Now, where did I put that pyrovalve? From a Predacon, you know. I bet you never even heard of those before. . . .

soothingly. "Don't fret, my boy. You will regain your wits in your protoform as long as all goes smoothly. I suppose you will stick with this new name you've chosen? Very well. Rather suitable I suppose, if a little hard to pronounce."

Shockwave burbled happily onward, even when Grimlock got stuck one day half transformed and had to

They can refine gases out of the atmosphere and burn them at will, you know. Or they could before they were all wiped out! Hah! Fascinating!"

Grimlock's mouth movements suggested he was snarling something unpleasant. Shockwave patted him in a fatherly manner, feeling very good about himself and all his very fine qualities. He stroked Grimlock's forehead

spend a week having his T-Cog shocked before he could be pushed one way or the other. He got pushed into his

Opposite: Grimlock, the leader of the Lightning Strike Coalition
Above: Grimlock changes halfway into his new Cretaceous altform

altform and destroyed nearly all of Shockwave's laboratories and pens. After that, Shockwave made a restrainer for the T-Cog and fitted it to Grimlock. Then he spent a week fixing the laboratory and himself. Only twenty of his largest Insecticons, selected and adapted from the finest natural stock into intelligent servants, had been able to restrain the monster.

Meanwhile the other Dinobots, as he fondly named them, took successful turns, although he had to admit a bad mistake on Slug's altform intellect after a few abortive attempts at smartening him up. He was really ridiculously unmanageable. They spent a bizarre afternoon attempting to test the extent of his skills at the remnants of Six Lasers. Shockwave had a Forged Insecticon throw balls across the stadium and make a log of how long it took Slug to fetch them. By the time a day had passed Slug had savaged and eaten more than thirty balls, and if not distracted by them, was so overexcited that he also ripped apart two Insecticon handlers. Shockwave gave up in disgust. Slug's memories, for good or ill, seemed overridden entirely by primal impulses when he was in his dinoform. To Shockwave's disappointment, he seemed mightily pleased with himself, and when changed back to his normal form, even more so. He had him put in an isolation cell, but even from outside the door he could hear a contented humming and snickering that put him in such a foul mood that he ruined his next two experiments.

Sludge and Swoop were different when altformed. Sludge was impaired but functional enough to react to voice command. He was unable to stop his dogged loyalty to Grimlock regardless of form and resisted all Shockwave's mind-training techniques, rendering him temporarily useless. Swoop, on the other hand, was

actually delighted to find a flying form and had not needed to have his synapses retuned. He was clever enough, in fact, to fool Shockwave into believing that he was a loyal subject, until the day he flew down from one of his test flights at terminal velocity and smashed Shockwave clean off the top of the observation tower and through four plates of decking. By the time Shockwave recovered and organized his other Forged defenders, Swoop had freed the other three and they were all long gone. The next he heard, the Dinobots were allied with

the wretched Autobot scraps, proclaiming themselves grandly the "defenders of Cybertron."

Shockwave brooded, lonely and betrayed, in his tower, and vowed to get them back. They were his, after all. His children. Yes. And he would have them, the ungrateful brats. He would prove himself a determined father and they would come to love him for his unswerving devotion to their development, one day. He started work on a new Forged, something suitably powerful and intelligent that he could use to bring them back. . . .

With the departure of the majority of Autobots and Decepticons from Cybertron, the Great War ended. For us on the homeworld, an era of Decepticon oppression began, though there was not much left to oppress and no sense of conclusion or victory. You might even, as the Forged liked to say, consider that there were no more Decepticons now that the cause was gone. Until either party returned with news, we were all in the same limbo. Shockwave tinkered and raved in his high castle, and we sat amid the bare spars of Iacon and dreamed of better days.

Above, left to right: Slug's primal instincts took over in his new altform; Sludge remained fiercly loyal to Grimlock; Swoop was a natural in flight and helped his friends escape

EXODUS

Although the departure of the Ark and the Nemesis had left me without direct input to events, the *Covenant* itself continued to record them without my intervention. The Quill activated sporadically, and the linked quantum pairs that sat within its nib at one end and voyaged freely through time and space at the other end worked busily together, converting fact and probability into history and prediction. Thus, we on Cybertron kept the records complete at Iacon, for those far from home and for ourselves.

After the desperate Autobots left Cybertron through the space bridge, they found themselves catapulted far from known space. None of them knew what to expect, which made what they found the more startling—a planet of living Transformers in orbit around a dying star, huge and glowing orange at the end of its days, bathing the little machine world in a seething infernal glare. The world they had found was Velocitron, a colony experiment created at the middle of the age of exploration, when there had been a fashion for groups of like-minded individuals to set forth and push their ideas to whatever extremes they desired. There was an art in Velocitron, a passion, and it was, as the name suggested, speed.

The Velocitronians, being of that Age and later, had kept alive the old stories of the Primes and the homeland after they were cut off during the Rust Plague. They had not intended originally to be separate from Cybertron for any length of time. Velocitron was a fun project, intended for wheeled and tracked bots of every kind to use as a creative pool in which to refine their altforms and compete. They had never imagined their small terraformed globe would have to become self-sustaining for millennia, and as a result it fell far short on Energon stocks, had but a very modest little Sparkwell, and had spent the last thousands of stellar cycles grimly watching the old star eat its way through the last of its hydrogen. If the Energon did not run out first, the star's mass would likely turn it nova and consume Velocitron and all on it.

The only other beings to visit were pirates—roving free bands of shipborne bots—whose small craft and smaller imaginations ended at raids and vendettas. In discovering all this, Optimus Prime could not conceal his puzzlement at the Velocitronians's depth of denial. Had they spent their efforts on building spaceships, they might have found their own way to salvation. Instead, as the Autobots cautiously made landfall, it seemed they had been waiting for a Prime to bail them out, and meanwhile had done nothing but race. As the Velocitronians prepared for their annual leadership contest—the Speedia—the Autobots received aid to make repairs with the permission of Override, the leader, and her followers.

Not all the Velocitronians were so keen to assist, however. No sooner had the final race preparations gotten under way than rumors of Decepticon arrival began to filter up through friends of a bot named Ransack, who had hoped to lead Velocitron and resented Override's authority. Someone aboard the Ark had sowed this seed of dissent and the notion of revolution. There was a traitor in the midst of the Autobot exodus. In the hopes of impressing the Velocitronians, Optimus Prime asked Silverbolt

to overfly the Speedia's final lap. This had mixed results, for although they loved Silverbolt's paces, his appearance overshadowed the victory of the rightful winner, Blurr, and thus played into Ransack's hands more than they wished. But it wasn't only local politics that held surprises for the new arrivals.

The Matrix of Leadership began to commune with Optimus Prime during a visit to the Velocitronian space bridge, startling him with a cryptic vision which at first he thought, hopefully, would result in his finding the Star Saber, the legendary sword of Prima. With this he could surely have a realistic hope of defeating Megatron! He was not to know that Vector Sigma and I had overseen the dispersion of the Star Saber's broken parts during our evacuation of the Iacon Archives during the Great War. We had kept all that secret. But the Matrix was leading him to something—not least new allies in the form of two new bots, Clocker and Mainspring, who helped Optimus to fend off Decepticon sympathizer assaults and chose to go with him upon the Ark.

Meanwhile, the strange shard of metal Optimus found at the bridge was recognized—Blurr, the Speedia victor, showed him a piece of the same sundered object mysteriously embedded in his trophy. Before they were able to restore it, however, Ransack and his sympathizers attacked. Override commanded the Velocitronian loyalists into defense and the Ark managed to escape as civil war broke out beneath them, a smaller but no less vicious copy of the strife that had destroyed Cybertron.

The space bridge at Velocitron, operating again after eons of disuse, simply flung the Ark toward the destination it had last been set to find—another place that had once been visited and used by a hundred worlds, now

abandoned for long ages following the Rust Plague. Junkion had been the dump of the Golden Age. Luckily for the stranded bots, there was enough good building material in the rubbish that the inventive, resourceful machines who had been drawn to work there had managed to survive very well in the long interim. They were scavengers and fixers extraordinaire, and were even able to break up and reassemble themselves with a skill and tenacity that appeared nearly magical to other bots. Although Junkion was not a planet, but rather a massive collection of scrap, there could have been no more fortunate destination for a group of desperate bots in need of repairs and on a quest to reassemble broken, long-lost objects.

As the Ark made landfall on Junkion, the Nemesis pulled into Velocitronian orbit, searching for the Autobots. Optimus Prime met Wreck-Gar, leader of the scattered tribes of Junkion, and Megatron encountered

Above: The Ark, in which the Autobots fled

Ransack and a ready-made cadre of Decepticon sympathizers whom he adopted readily enough, though he wasted no time on their piddling affairs. He paused only long enough for minor repairs before launching in pursuit of the Ark. In that sense, the Velocitronians got a taste of his true nature, and not the propaganda they had been fed by the traitor.

On Junkion, this traitor finally came to light, lured into a trap set up by Prowl and Jazz and incriminated doubly by his murder of the traderbot Shearbolt. Axer, a shifter, had presented himself as the loyal Autobot Hound since before the departure from Cybertron. Axer had moved rapidly to fulfill his true long-term plans in the aid of Megatron once he saw the chance to do so—he planned the recovery of a weapon massive and lethal enough to end the war once and for all, and he knew it was concealed at Junkion.

Meanwhile Optimus Prime traveled at the behest of the Matrix through Junkion's space bridge to a place he had been once before—in another body, in another time so far gone that he could barely remember standing there before in search of inspiration and hope. The Tomb of Solus Prime echoed to the sound of silence under its silver moon, but his presence activated the memories held deepest within the Matrix of Leadership. Solus herself appeared to him to tell him that he must hurry onward—danger was snapping at his heels. But as Optimus tried to speak with her, Chaindrive rushed up on an urgent mission from Wheeljack, bearing the final pieces of the artefact that the Matrix had sought for him. Memory and association made him recall their true nature then. This was not the longed-for Star Saber, but instead the mystical device of Vector Prime: the Blades of Time.

Moving at Solus's urging, Optimus remade the Blades and was transported instantly into the hidden dimensional pocket beyond the rim of the universe where Vector Prime had retreated at the time of our dissolution to continue his work adjusting and correcting the flows of space-time. He had also hidden there, unable to witness the future and unwilling to take part in it, but he roused himself from his ennui long enough to tell Optimus that Axer's real goal was to extract the Requiem Blaster from the place that Prima had flung it. Since it was thrown away, its nature and the gravitational pull it exerted had soon caused local debris to accumulate around it. Junkion *was* the mass that hid it from view. Vector had guarded it always, and now he knew when it was disturbed.

The Requiem Blaster! The very idea of it in the hands of the ignorant, who did not know its terrible history, how it had been made, how it worked, what it had done! But none of those things mattered to Megatron or his minions. While Optimus was on his pilgrimage to Solus, Axer had escaped and burrowed down to the heart of Junkion. As soon as he touched the Blaster and began to move it out—this was the weapon of a Prime, huge by modern standards and requiring many ordinary bots to budge it—Junkion itself began to destabilize. Ignoring all signs of the disruption caused by bothandling an object that contained within its internal rift chambers the shielded mass of a minor star, the Decepticons brought the Nemesis over in time to bolt the Blaster to its hull.

It was not the only buried object of interest within Junkion, however. Another bot named Cannonspring awoke from a long nap as the Blaster's gravity well shifted around him and looked up to make contact with his brothers: Mainspring, Pinion, Clocker, and Chaindrive.

The five brothers, Autobot and Junkion as they appeared, reassembled themselves into the original combiner, Nexus Prime. United, they also united the weapon they had divided to conceal: the Cyber Caliber, Nexus's own weapon. They gifted this to Optimus, and just in time, for the Blaster was already being ineptly set and turned toward the Ark.

Optimus defended the Autobots valiantly, but just as it seemed he would at last meet Megatron in a conclusive fight, he was assaulted by a sudden vision of the AllSpark. Torn, he retreated to the Ark with the necessity of pursuing it. Meanwhile the Blaster, misunderstood and incorrectly used, overheated, threatening to blow the Nemesis and all around it into oblivion.

In a panic the Decepticons jettisoned it, and it slid ignominiously to its place at the core of the giant scrapheap. Axer they abandoned on the surface—he was too unreliable even for Megatron. The Nemesis, lumbering, disappointed, turned to make pursuit. They themselves were chased by the Star Seekers, pirates attracted when news of the Prime and the Cybertronians had flashed across the quadrant of local space. Axer joined the pirates under the leadership of their captain, Thundertron, and thus, ramshackle, they all set out after the Ark.

Meanwhile, at home on Cybertron the war went on, patchily, with the Dinobots now standing in defense as Shockwave continued his various experiments. He came to Iacon at one point to drag me out of my isolation and tow me across to one of his massive engineering laboratories. Using his patching technology, he wired me to a node of Vector Sigma he had managed to unearth and imprison, demanding that both of us create for him a Dark Energon copy of the Matrix of Leadership. I will not bore you with the horrific details of the ordeal, as I scorn to mention them in the face of so much suffering and torment endured by all the rest at his diabolical hands. I will only record the grim satisfaction I felt at his enormous error of judgment in considering that he would be able to combine the two of us, Prime and Sigma, and make of us his instrument. We pretended to attempt the task, but there was never any suggestion he would get what he was after. It was pleasing to thwart him. I am glad he afforded me the chance to do so.

As we made our plays on Cybertron, the Autobots came to a new world far away, but one they recognized with dismay rather late in the day when they found Sharkticons. And where there are Sharkticons, the Quintessons cannot be far behind. Once the Quintessons discovered who was who, they wasted little time in taking Optimus prisoner and putting him on trial—as was their wont. They existed to fulfill the demands of their peculiar, self-serving legal system and valued it over all other things. His crime? The expulsion of the Quintessons from Cybertron ages before. Never mind that he was not Prime then but only an ordinary Orion Pax. The trial, the proof of Quintesson authority to themselves: this was what mattered. They found him innocent and sentenced him to death, naturally.

The Decepticons fared no better with them, getting the same treatment in short order, much to Megatron's disgust and fury. His personal loathing of the Quintessons went beyond any normal hatred, and to be their prisoner and their would-be victim was a possible future that almost made his head explode. He and Optimus both recognized that only by teaming up and fighting as one, for once, would either Cybertronian faction manage to

escape. Their old common enemy made brief allies of them, but the peace lived no longer than a Quintesson innocent.

The Ark fled. The Nemesis pursued. And behind them, the pirates brought up the rear.

A SEA CHANGE

Once again pursuing visions of the AllSpark, the remaining Autobots took the space bridges where they could, and powered by their own engines where they could not, used stars to slingshot themselves to speeds suitable for crossing the galaxy. They saved precious energy for decelerations, when it seemed they had reached points that must be explored. Like a ragged banner, the craft of the Decepticons and the pirates followed them, but their next encounter was not with a planet. Instead, they were intercepted by a small fleet of peculiar starships in the dark spaces between systems who appeared suddenly, decloaking from stealth against the blackness to shine out suddenly in the light given off by the Ark itself. They matched the Ark's speed effortlessly and drew into flanking positions.

These were more pirates, known to the Star Seekers, but of a kind never seen before by Cybertronian eyes. They hailed the Ark cheerfully, and their leader appeared on the intercom and announced herself as Mercury.

Prowl and Jazz, Bulkhead, and the others all peered closer and closer. "There's something odd about that face," Jazz said after a minute, and there was—her face altered itself all the time, as if remodeled from within, subtly, but still ever-changing.

Optimus made cautious introductions—after their previous experiences, he was expecting the unexpected—and Mercury seemed delighted. She said, "We have had news from the Star Seekers about your presence out here, but of course they're not fast enough to take advantage. Full of old silly resentment about the Rust, they are."

"And you?" Optimus asked.

"We aren't stupid two-formers," Mercury said, dismissively, adding, "No offense!"

"None taken," Bulkhead growled. Ratchet frowned. The rest goggled.

"Don't seem to have any guns," Prowl muttered from the defense station.

"We're Mutacons, shifters," Mercury said. "We left Neutronia as soon as the Rust hit, using ordinary ships, and we've been out ever since. "

"It's weird," said Ratchet, "I only get one Spark reading per ship. . . ."

"Oh, yesyesyes, you would," Mercury said. "Watch out the windows. . . ."

The Autobots eyed the silvery, sleek ships of the Mutacons with misgiving and curiosity. They were taken aback when the skins of the craft slowly became lined with black, as if they were painted over by a vigorous, detailing brush. Then the lines became gaps, and without sound or warning the entire craft broke apart into hundreds of smaller pieces, each of them momentarily assuming the shape of the parent craft in miniature before altforming into different individuals, the smallest the size of Minicons and the largest akin to Bulkhead's size.

Opposite: The Mutacon ship breaks apart into a fleet of individual bots; the Transformers had never seen bots with infinite altforms before

"What the . . . ?" Ratchet said. "Now there are thousands. . . ."

"We are one, and we are many," Mercury said as the smaller bots slowly clustered up again and re-formed as if they were all combiners, able to shift their own shape and join at will to any other.

"Whoa, how many . . . who?" Bumblebee signaled; everyone was thinking the same thing.

"We change all the time," Mercury said as the individual ships remade themselves all into one giant vessel, which altered its shape before their eyes into an exact copy of the Ark.

"They *are* the ships," Bulkhead said, wonderingly. "I . . . they're not like us."

"What do you want of us, Mutacons?" Optimus asked.

"We trade for forms and news," Mercury said. "How is Cybertron—what happened there?"

"What do they trade?" Silverbolt wondered uneasily.

"Cybertron is in stasis," Optimus said. "What would you have of us, I ask again?"

"We seek the Prime named Amalgamous," Mercury said. "For we have something of his that needs to be returned. We found it, far in the darkness, and it has changed us as you see. But as time goes on, we have blended and remade ourselves so many times that we are losing our memories of who we are, all are becoming one. We don't want to be one, but we will not return the item to any but its rightful owner."

Optimus bowed his head as the Matrix activated, supplying the memories he needed. "The Transformation Cog," he said.

The others looked dumbly at him, never having heard of either this Prime or his powers.

"Wait a second," Prowl said. "Amalgamous Prime? There was such a person?"

"Yes," Optimus said. "And still is, possibly."

"Do you think we can trust her?" Ratchet asked, still stinging from their recent narrow escape. "I mean look at the Quintessons. You said Quintus Prime made them. . . ."

"Oh, them," Mercury said. "A lot of silly lunatics prating about the law. We haven't got any interest in them. Been that. Done that. Oh, it was sooooo-oooo boring!" She giggled and sighed at the same time. "But you're here, the first real Prime we have seen, ever, in our whole lives *ever*! You must have an idea where Amalgamous might be! In return, we'll fool those pursuing you into thinking we're you so you can get away from them. They're pesky. Decepticons. We heard about them from Thundertron. He's such an idiot. Babbles anything in return for Energon."

"You have Energon?" Suddenly they were all ears.

"Yes, yes," Mercury said. "Went back for it when the Plague was gone. Got plenty Energon."

"What would you take in trade for some of that?" Optimus asked.

"Well, if you don't know about Amalgamous, I guess I'd trade it for a merge with you."

There was silence on the Ark bridge for a moment. "What does *that* mean?" Bulkhead asked, chuckling. "Sounds kinky."

"Me and you would merge forms. You'd learn about being me, and I'd learn all about how to be you!" Mercury said, blithely unaware of anything odd. "Information is always good, and change is never boring. And being a Prime must be *amazing*. We'd give you a lot of Energon for that!"

"I do not think it would be right for you to impersonate me," Optimus said. "It could put all of your lives in danger."

"Oh, I don't want to get anything by it unless it leads to Amalgamous Prime," Mercury said. "I guess you don't know where he is, or you might have traded that."

"I do not know," Optimus said solemnly. "The last I heard, he was on Cybertron, but millennia have passed since then, and he has not been seen for an age and more."

"What if we say no?" Jazz asked.

"Well, I'll have to ask the ones after you, but I don't think they'll know. Thundertron doesn't even believe in the Transformation Cog's powers. He thinks we were all irradiated by a neutron star, but then, he is quite intellectually impeded." Mercury looked resigned, her emotions always revealed on her face.

"What will happen to you if you do not find Amalgamous?" Optimus asked, ignoring the others around him who had begun to snicker and make suggestive remarks. He was at least glad they were taking the moment as light relief from what had been a long and hard journey.

"I suppose that eventually we'll just be so completely plastic and alive that we'll just . . . melt into one big glob," Mercury said. "See, that wouldn't be so bad, except then how would we be anything, you know, if we could be anything? But if you could help us with the Transformation Cog, maybe then we could help you out by giving you some of its ability to heal and change. I . . . but the only way I can give you any of those things is through merging. Because it's not a *knowing* thing. It's a *being* thing."

Prowl leaned over Optimus and cut off the comm for a moment. "This is a real object? This Transformation Cog? It's not like ours? I don't understand."

"It is. The Cog was Amalgamous Prime's artefact of power, enabling him, perhaps even requiring him to be in a state of almost constant physical flux. He could take any form out of almost any element or combination. He gifted the Transformers as they are now with lesser versions of that power in their T-Cogs. I do not know what can have happened to him that he is separated from it now." Optimus frowned, wondering if Amalgamous had been away when the space bridges were blown to save them from the rust plague. Could he have been a victim? But there was no answer in the Matrix. He assumed Amalgamous was alive.

"It seems that the Cog's power to alter matter may ultimately prove fatal for the Mutacons," Ratchet said. "It would do the same to us. We can't risk losing ourselves in that way. Cybertron needs us to survive as we are."

"I do not propose to take the Cog," Optimus said. "The Mutacons are clearly able to manage it for themselves. I will help them to locate Amalgamous, once the threat of the Decepticons has been neutralized."

He relayed this offer to Mercury, who was overjoyed, but then, almost as fast, despondent. "In that case we will do all we can to speed you on your way. But, as a token of your good faith, would you not meet me just for a moment, in person?"

Much to the hoots, catcalls, and some dismay of the other Autobots, Optimus agreed and gave permission for Mercury to board the Ark, though he did take Prowl and Bulkhead with him to the airlock. The Matrix hummed quietly, but gave no sign of objections.

They made the usual airlock procedures; then Bulkhead on the door controls started suddenly: "Hey!"

Before he had a chance to operate the doors, the slender silver figure of Mercury had already arrived inside the ship, moving through the solid walls and blast doors between them as if they didn't exist. There was a rattle and *snikk* as Prowl leveled his guns at her, but Optimus gently waved him off as the silver shape, which started as only a general form with smooth, curved surfaces, slowly became more defined. Mercury smiled as she solidified and winked at Prowl, her left arm copying his gun hand suddenly, in looks if not in function, before she let it slip back into just being her arm again.

Optimus could not help but smile, reminded of Amalagamous and feeling a twinge of nostalgia.

"No more weird tricks, lady," Bulkhead said sternly, although his tone was surprised and uncertain.

Mercury pulled a face at him. "Can't help it," she said, shrugging. "I see interesting things an' I have to." She bowed her head briefly at Optimus. "Pleased to meet you. I never saw a Prime before. I started to think there weren't any." Then she held her hand out.

"Optimus . . ." Prowl said warily. "She just walked through a wall."

"So I saw," Optimus said. He felt through the Matrix, but it gave no hint of danger. He had faith in it. He put out his hand. "I have no doubt that bullets will have little effect on her too."

"You're right!" Mercury said, shaking his hand happily. For a moment they all saw her fingers pass clearly through Optimus's hand.

In Optimus's chest the Matrix of Leadership sparked lightly, and a rill of light ran from it down his arm and into the point of contact between them. Optimus jumped in surprise, though he gave no sign of being harmed. Bulkhead and Prowl snapped automatically into gun-mode but hesitated as Mercury's eyes went wide and round, and her mouth dropped open in a comic expression of shock.

"That," she said after a moment, "is a whole *lot* of history!"

"Optimus?" Prowl demanded, suspiciously.

"It is all right, Prowl. The Matrix granted her wish to know the fate of Cybertron and its inhabitants," Optimus said, rather taken aback himself.

"These Decepticons are so funny!" Mercury giggled, shaking Optimus's hand and then letting it go. "Peace through tyranny—with one guy in charge doing all the bossing and everyone else doing what he says—oh! That's a classic!" She started to laugh so hard that she had to double over and put her hands on her knees. "I'm gonna blow a fuse! Wait until the others hear this!"

"Does that mean you *don't* like the Decepticons?" Bulkhead asked, his guns slowly lowering.

"Oh, don't get me wrong. They're hilarious," Mercury said, slowly righting herself with many pauses, easing her joints as if laughing had made them seize up. "Peace through . . . a hahaha . . . oh dear. Well, how rude of me. Thank you so much for the news, Prime. We're honored. Now you should get blastin' out of here while we play a little game with those guys."

"You know, Mercury, you could take the Cog and leave it where you found it," Optimus said then, his voice containing the hint of a command, the hint of a test. "If Amalgamous is alive, he may return to look for it one day."

"Yeah, we thought of that," Mercury said, "but there was a black hole right next to it—well, sorta. It could go in there . . . and then it's gone. That's why we picked it up in the first place. That and not knowing what it was." She looked a bit regretful, but then she shrugged and smiled.

"Better that than the alternative," Optimus said, and Mercury reluctantly agreed.

"Yeah, if you don't get back in time, we'll do that. Well, good luck. We'll be helping you!" She turned and faced the door, then half bowed toward Prowl. "I'll be good now!" She made a forward-pointing gesture, and commanded Bulkhead regally, "Helmsman, the door!"

Bulkhead frowned and grumbled as he activated the door controls and watched as Mercury hopped out and darted off, a silver rocket arrowing toward the distant cluster of the other Mutacons. The three Autobots observed for a few moments through the porthole.

"What is that odd noise?" Prowl said after a minute.

"I think that's a ship laughing," Bulkhead said, his head cocked to one side. "At least we've done *someone* a good deed today." He nodded. "Want to wait and see what happens to the Nemesis?" His voice gave away that he was longing to. He pounded his fist into his palm and chuckled.

"There is no time," Optimus said, sadly, because he would have liked to, very much. "Let us go." He looked down at his open hand and felt inside his body the stirrings of a new knowledge, a healing speed and power it had not had before, as if each part had within it a billion tiny T-Cogs able to change from one form to another. "We have much to do."

There were many more stellar cycles and many more adventures and trials on the long voyages of the Ark, too many and too complex to relate here. However, in spite of delays and deviations, the basic nature of the journey did not change: the Autobots pursued the AllSpark, under Optimus's guidance, and the Decepticons pursued the Autobots, unswerving in their determination.

Meanwhile, back on Cybertron, the Decepticon administration fell apart due to petty infighting, leaving the planet in a relative peace—if you can call squabbling and scavenging a peaceful existence. Only Shockwave and those loyal to him maintained their activities without a pause, building themselves a place out in the Sea of Rust, while those of us left in Iacon slowly went about our business rebuilding and salvaging what we could.

More and more of Shockwave's "children" and would-be "children" escaped too, which was good news for us. Among them were a particularly resourceful pair, Arcee, a great warrior, and her partner, the spirited bot Cliffjumper. Like many others, they longed to join the continuing fight against the Decepticons—but unlike others they managed to operate the space bridge and leap far, far out to make a successful rendezvous with the Ark team.

I was relieved. For all that had happened, it seemed that we would survive and our spirits were still strong, and that, for now, was enough to be glad for.

The Exodus of the Cybertronians came to an end officially in the *Covenant* on the day that the Autobots made Earthfall and shortly thereafter were joined by Arcee and Cliffjumper. Thus I knew with certainty that whatever fate awaited us, it would be decided there, and soon. We on Cybertron could only watch and wait as events unfolded for us in the pages of the book.

EARTHFALL

In this concluding chapter of the *Covenant*, I have decided to offer you excerpts directly from the personal journals of Optimus Prime and Arcee. Although there are many things also written about this period in the *Covenant*, nothing but their personal observations quite conveys the complexity and fullness of our story. There are many facts, but what are facts without subjective meaning, or events without the involvement of a key witness? Possibly, they are scientific artefacts of a kind, but above all they are silent, dumb things, as useless as an unread book. Annotations and additions of my own are noted where they occur, for the sake of completion.

PERSONAL ARCHIVE: OPTIMUS PRIME

After so long, it was strange indeed to reach this planet again. Although I had heard it was full of life, I did not expect what we found—civilizations, technologies. For the last months, as we have been on final approach, we have learned to know them by their broadcasts, and though the others say nothing about it, what amazes me is how alike we are. Our bodies are different, our lifespans and our needs unalike, but what drives us and moves us is very much the same: humans talk about the heart, and Cybertronians the Spark; they love and fear, think and fight one another, as we do.

I looked for signs as we came within the light of their sun, and I find them everywhere—the many readings of Cybertronian technology on their world, the intensity of their struggles, the strange richness of their stories—against all odds, Unicron the Destroyer of Worlds has borne eons of life. I feel everything hangs in the balance. The Nemesis still pursues. We still track the AllSpark. So long this journey has been, and in spite of all its battles, so unchanging.

I had begun to despair of a conclusion that would come in any way other than by the deaths of those concerned—time wearing out what passionate determination could not. But the humans are like the Primes, a scattering of unknown potential, untested mettle, manifold destinies shifting like shoals of flybots. I am put in mind of Vector Prime's mandala, the Blades of Time, and the way it would spin through chaos and suddenly form a definitive shape. This journey is ending here. For the oddest reason, a human phrase from story keeps coming to my mind—"Journeys end in lovers meeting." The Matrix resonates with it, and other related things it plucks from the airwaves, like one of Alchemist's metallurgical prediction engines, or the Quill scribbling in the *Covenant*.

I don't mention such things to the others. Since I became Prime again, there are so few things I can share with them. I wish—but there is no point in wishing.

But who are the lovers?

I can't answer that. With this in mind, however, I have been considering our roles as we move to make first contact. Attempting to remain hidden is futile. Bumblebee and Arcee are the most sympathetic among us, the kindest. I will give them the assignments that take them close to the humans. Inevitably they will run into each other. Although this first contact will happen outside a formal environment, I believe it better this way, more natural

and therefore less likely to meet with the kind of resistance the humans traditionally put up when approached via their institutions. It is a risk, undeniably.

Meanwhile we will construct our base and make preparations for Ground Bridge setup.

For a time after their arrival on Earth, the Autobots attempted to keep themselves a secret and their interaction with the humans to a minimum. However, they were forced to make official overtures to the Secret Service of the USA, where they had made their hidden desert base, once Optimus had been proved right and Bumblebee and Arcee stumbled into, tripped up on, and rolled over the first contact moment in typically haphazard fashion.

It was not long before the Nemesis also found its orbit around the Earth.

PERSONAL ARCHIVE: OPTIMUS PRIME

The Decepticons acted to reactivate the space bridge within Earth's solar system. This came after months of work on their part to recover portions of Dark Energon, the lifeblood of Unicron, and use it to reanimate the dead.

At first their tests remained Earthbound—Ratchet and I fought an army of raised Cybertronian soldiers left here from who knows what age past? The Golden Age had surely sent them here before humans even existed. I recall no formal expeditions to this world taking place at that time, but given the esoteric interest that was always circulating among groups who believed the old creation mythos, I surmise there must have been Transformers here. Doing what, it is hard to say, but most likely they were archaeologists, come to find the legendary artefacts of old. I regret not paying more attention to Alpha Trion's museum manifests now.

In any case, Megatron's efforts here have certainly been the most industrious ones he has ever made. He intended to summon all of Cybertron's fallen to his side as a zombie host and conquer Earth in Unicron's name. The narrowest margin allowed the Autobots to be victorious. Cut off from the source of their power, the zombie army fell back to corpses, sad fragments orbiting the sun like a flock of metal birds. Megatron himself appeared to be killed later, when his ship crashed, but I feel no closure. This is not over.

Megatron's obsession with Unicron disturbs me. I see that he is convinced that awakening the monster would grant him the power he's always desired. Only I know the absolute naïveté of that assumption. Still, nothing I can say alters his course. You can tow a bot to knowledge, but you cannot make it think. He has had a taste for Dark Energon for a while now, and constant exposure to it only accelerates his departure into delusions. Must I wait for one of his aides to start an insurrection, as his madness increases? What is the likelihood? Starscream is too fearful, Shockwave is served well by Megatron no matter how insane, Airachnid has failed and must be considered out of play, Soundwave—well, who knows what goes through his mind since the war? The rest are too small-minded to organize a rebellion in a tack factory. No, it will not be any of them who topple him from his throne. Rightfully the deed is mine, though I did not make him into what he is; he was my friend, and once my brother. I would not see him fall farther, but at the same time, I find no way to hold him back other than by recruiting the humans to the Autobot cause, if not for our survival, then certainly for theirs.

Alas, they are very stubborn and unwilling to credit the half of what I say, convinced they are still powers worth reckoning with in their own right. They have simply no idea what our technologies are capable of.

I see only uncertainty in our futures. No strategy seems fitting. To fight Megatron once and for all might result in his victory, given that he has us savagely outgunned. To let him fall into his schemes might destroy him faster, but it might bring him to powers that cannot be countered. So I continue day by day to move in reaction, not in action. I wait. It is hard to wait with no way to know any outcome of it. To the others I show only conviction. Inside I feel nothing. I wait for the moment when I will know. I ignore the voice that asks—what if there isn't one? But it is there.

Journeys end in lovers meeting.

It is there.

After the failure of Megatron's ship and its crash landing on the surface, Starscream briefly assumed leadership of the Decepticons, although Megatron soon returned to life and form, much to his dismay. They argued but were an old and tested couple and, as ever, reconciled to their usual posts. The factions tussled over the discovery, on Earth, of various artefacts that had come here piecemeal after their ejection from the Iacon Archive at the outset of the war, among them the Polarity Gauntlet, the Phase Shifter, and the Apex Armor. All these skirmishes were minor, however. The activity, the digging up of long-buried Energon deposits, and the repeated use of ground bridge and space bridge technology, together with Megatron's Dark Energon-laced presence, all conspired to wake the sleeper beneath. Unicron stirred and the Earth quaked.

PERSONAL ARCHIVE: ARCEE

It's pretty rare I get the opportunity to keep up my log! If Optimus hadn't reminded me, I'd probably still not have written anything in it since we reached Earth! I see my last entry is all about worrying how to take some much-needed justice to Shockwave. Seems a lifetime ago.

Since then—I don't think I can even *remember* half the things that have happened, so I'll stick to the parts that mean the most and hope someone else has connected the dots on the rest. Ratchet's pretty thorough. I'm sure he's been a good downloader.

Humans are so fragile. That's what goes through my mind every day. Here we are, bringing all this world of trouble, used to Cybertronian war, and they can be snuffed out in a stiff breeze, seems like. Take Jack, my friend. Not only is he tiny and squishy, but he hasn't got any other forms or any weapons, if you don't count his brain. Even that works against itself half the time. I have no idea how this species has got along as far as it has, but the weird thing is that the sheer bad luck lack of all that stuff doesn't really bother them, though I think most

of them are like Miko, who rides around with Bulk—she's crazy about bots, for the power, the size, and the toughs. I have to say I'd be like her if I were human. Maybe less crazy. Definitely less loud.

There's something you just can't help liking about being so damned *liked*, though. I was worried about it until I saw how attached 'Bee got to Raf, and Bulk to Miko. I thought losing Cliffjumper and losing Tailgate had knocked a permanent screw loose in me or something when I found myself carting Jack all over the place, acting like a big protecting hero and—get this—*liking* it. Yeah, no prizes for spotting the overcompensation much. Can't save Cliffjumper, can't save Tailgate, *have* to save Jack. But once I got that out of my system, I realized I still don't want Jack or any of them to get blasted by the 'Cons. That's no way to go for anyone, and I won't stand around and let it happen. Can't save Cybertron? Save a human. Give Airachnid a good smackdown. Heh, that last bit was sweet.

I really hope it doesn't come down to our world or theirs. I really don't. Their world was pretty good until lately. But now Unicron's waking up, and it's like the place is falling apart. Natural disasters, waves of stone golems or whatever they are—it's a chaos, and these squishy humans are dying all over the place. We were out today fighting, and the scale of it is as bad as Cybertron in the worst of the war. I've seen some battles, but they were always at a scale I understood, between even matches. This is more like a wipeout. Weirdest moment—Megatron appeared with the 'Cons and helped us out.

Then he offered to *join forces*. Just to defeat Unicron, you understand. So now I have my journal time. In a few hours we're going to move out and descend to the center of the Earth, and Optimus and Megatron are going to take out Uni's Spark. Actually, I'm not too sure on the details of that, I always focus on what I've got to do, but my part is clear—defend Prime, make sure they get in there. Naturally, I'll be watching all our backs. The idea of descending into some pit of hell with 'Cons as partners is less than comforting. And I don't trust Megatron. Not sure Optimus does either, but what choice do we have? I guess Megatron will pull some tricky scrap out of his tailpipe at the last minute, but even he can see that if Unicron wakes up completely, then we're all finished. Just have to rely on his survival instincts.

Rely on Megatron. I never thought I'd write that down!

Oh, Ratchet's calling. Gotta go. More later. If there is a . . . yeah, gotta go!

PERSONAL ARCHIVE: OPTIMUS PRIME

The brief alliance between our factions kept together as we battled our way through hidden halls and vaults, fighting off Unicron's autoimmune defensive systems all the way. I could not help but be reminded of the Thirteen and their journey—so very different, so full of that optimism that was hard to muster with Megatron beside me instead of Vector, or his namesake, Megatronus, brave enough to fight Unicron and his own demons. If only he knew—but of course he couldn't. 'Cons on one side, my friends to the other, I had never felt so lonely, but we were too busy smashing bots and surviving Unicron to be more than briefly aware of it. I kept thinking of circles. Here we were again, only, we weren't.

Opposite: Arcee, the latest Autobot to arrive on Earth

All told, our plans went well. I saw Megatron assaulted by Unicron's powerful will, and stand against it—a feat that cannot be overstated. We two made it to the Spark Chamber of Unicron together, and I braced myself for the only trick we knew to work—to use the Matrix of Leadership against it in raw form, and force him back into submission that way. Again, Unicron attacked Megatron's self-command, to force him to kill me, attempting to paralyze me with his aura . . . but again Megatron resisted to the limit of his being. I waited for Megatron's betrayal, but it never came. He may have still considered himself my enemy, but no brother could have done a finer job. Unicron beat him, took possession of him, did his worst, but Megatron had bought me enough time to complete our mission.

Journeys end in lovers meeting.

The essence of the Matrix, of all the Thirteen, plus the additional power of Primus's Spark frequencies caused the Spark of Unicron to dissipate: he was not dead, only altered into a non-corporeal being. But the worst danger was temporarily averted. The fact I believed myself once again to be the clerk, Orion Pax, loyal to Megatronus—*that* was simply an unforeseen change.

I think now if I had not lost my memories during that duel of essences, Megatron would have killed me on the spot. As it was, he realized the facts fast enough and took me with him back aboard the Nemesis as his loyal servant.

It was not to last. A curious clerk can always see the facts he's told to administer, and how they add up. I discovered my errors, his deception, and his attempt to crack the knowledge of the Iacon Archives. Once again we circled and returned to our places. Our struggle was not done, but the end was close now. I knew worse would come before better did.

The humans lived, largely ignorant of how close they had come to extinction. And our next tasks awaited us—the safeguarding of the remaining Iacon relics from Decepticon attention.

In spite of my actions in contacting Optimus regarding the artefacts, Megatron was soon to obtain the Forge of Solus Prime. He returned to Cybertron with it and located the long-neglected tomb of Liege Maximo. The tomb was not marked with any name, though I knew well whose it was. Where Maximo's Spark may have been resting in peace, this was not the fate of his preserved corpse. Megatron hacked his arm off and had it fitted to his own body in order to wield the Forge and craft himself a Dark Star Saber, planning to finish Optimus with it once and for all. I suppose some people would find rich ironies in that.

Naturally, Optimus fought him, and in the crushing blows they dealt, the ancient fractures within the Star Saber caused it to break. Optimus survived, but in the events that followed, turncoats turned again; the Autobots received the Forge of Solus as a gift from a defecting Dreadwing, and Megatron allowed Starscream back into the fold in the service of his greater visions. The Decepticons held the Autobots' human allies hostage and so received the Omega Keys from the Autobots in turn. Now Megatron was set to use the power of the Omega Lock, unleashing the creativity of Primus, to cyberform the Earth, destroying all native lifeforms. Again the Autobots stopped him, but at the price of the Lock itself being broken—seemingly destroying all hope for Cybertron's own recovery.

However, in spite of the Decepticons' great efforts to gain an edge, including the reengineering of that most ancient of beasts, the Predacon, they could not best the Autobots' defenses. The one to turn the tide was not Optimus, however, but another.

That event was itself the key that opened the lock of stasis that had held for so long between Autobot and Decepticon. As I had once written in the Covenant, *longing for a catalyst, now fate threw together on the Nemesis a potent mix of events culminating in mortal combat above Earth, where once again the struggle over the Omega Lock exploded into battle. The Star Saber had been remade and found its way to Bumblebee's hand. Before he could restore it to the only Prime—Optimus—Megatron saw the theft from his hoard and shot Bumblebee, who tumbled lifeless into the silvery primordial soup of combined CNA and synthetic Energon that powered the Omega Lock. As one, the Autobots's hearts broke to see him lost, even that of Optimus, who fell back beneath Megatron's ferocious assault until Megatron stood poised for the kill, his hour come round at last. He would have done it too, I believe, had not the Star Saber cut through him from stem to stern. It was Bumblebee's hand that held it, and Bumblebee's voice that spoke—"You took my voice; I'm taking your Spark."*

Two journeys ended there when Megatron fell and Bumblebee returned to life. The Autobots, revitalized, used the miracle mix to restore health to Cybertron's core at last.

But other paths had yet to cross, yet to find their destination. Though Megatron fell far, far down to Earth, quite dead, the lingering spirit of Unicron found his empty husk gladly. Quietly, carefully, it crept within. . . .

I relate these facts drily. They were anything but, yet time and length compel me to brevity at points. We must, as you say, "cut to the chase."

Megatron rebelled, finding himself alive but under occupation. However, he learned what everyone opposing Unicron learned one way or another—there was no greater will, no defiance that could withstand his dark commands. Megatron, for the first time since he crawled from the Well, was truly enslaved, and in his prison forced to suffer, not only whatever Unicron wished to inflict upon him, but also the humiliation of seeing his body used as the tool through which Unicron would destroy everything, Earth and Cybertron alike. Unicron was not his ally, as he had supposed. He was everybody's mortal enemy.

What happened next can, through the lens of history, be seen as a kind of poetic justice, an end to a struggle that had finally come full circle.

Optimus Prime had found the AllSpark.

PERSONAL ARCHIVE: OPTIMUS PRIME

I had thought myself ended when Bumblebee fell—a moment of despair so great in me then that all that Unicron himself had ever done to destroy the Thirteen Primes was as nothing against it. Why him? Why not the millions of others who had passed that gate before him? I can't say, only that there was a special light in Bumblebee, and when it went out, my own faith went with him. I saw my death in the descent of the Dark Saber in Megatron's hand. I was surprised a little, disappointed. And then suddenly Megatron was no more. The reprieve was beyond belief. It shook me to my Spark and I felt suddenly with incredible force the fool I had been. I was not alone. I had never been alone, Prime or not. We, the Autobots, were one.

This was in my mind when I found the vessel containing the AllSpark at last, and finally that wretched line stopped circling in my mind. Journeys end.

Journeys end.

Of course, the Autobots would stand against Unicron, no matter what form he took, or whose body he seized. We would not let Earth or Cybertron fall, so long as any of us were still standing. But only I—not the last of the Thirteen Primes, but one of the last, and the only one present—knew how to do it.

Unicron could not be killed. Only unification with Primus would end his journey, and we did not have the option of that. But I held in my hands a vessel, a part of Primus, if facts be told, which was made for and capable of safely containing a Spark of that magnitude, for it held the AllSpark right now.

To imprison Unicron required only that I empty that vessel. To empty that vessel I must put the contents somewhere safe, where they could be transferred back to Cybertron. There was only one possibility.

For a moment I hesitated. Journeys end. I hoped that I would be granted enough time to do all that must be done before that end. I thought of Solus, and Megatronus, of Quintus, Alchemist, Onyx, Micronus, of Amalgamous and Nexus and Vector, of Prima and Alpha Trion. Especially I thought of Maximo—clever Maximo, who understood that people are not driven from above by tyranny, but from within by desire.

I opened the vessel. . . .

After that, events took on such a momentum of their own, they carried me effortlessly to my meeting on Cybertron on a wave of what looked like typical Autobot defiance. It felt oddly satisfying for once to be the one playing the ruse, though I was sad to deceive my friends—but if they had known my plans, those plans would not have worked.

Unicron, the Decepticons, the Autobots, and I danced through the moves of strike and counterstrike, Autobots losing ground, until finally I was alone, fleeing through the air as if for my life with the AllSpark Vessel in my hand. Of course Megatron, ridden by Unicron, shot me down.

I crashed into the Hydrax Plateau, and he followed closely, reaching to wrest the Vessel from my hands as I lay there. I spoke with skill worthy of Liege Maximo at his self-convinced best, "All seems lost. . . ."

"I shall devour your AllSpark whole and relish the taste of lives that will never be!" Unicron said. Without pause, he cued the control, and the Vessel duly opened.

I watched as he realized, after a moment, that it was empty.

I wondered what it felt like to have as your last thought the notion that you'd been tricked out of everything. Judging by the expression on Megatron/Unicron's face, it was quite something.

I couldn't resist saying, for the Thirteen, for the Autobots, for Earth, "Unicron, it is *you* who shall never be again."

Then the power of the Vessel sucked his spirit into its depths. Megatron fell to the ground facedown, an emptied shell. The snarling packs of undead Predacons that Unicron had summoned to destroy the Well, and within it, Primus, faltered and fell—nothing more than scrap. Without a body, inside a prison not of his own making, Unicron raged, an orb of pure malice, screaming in impotence, forever.

I reached out to pick him up.

Shakily Megatron got to his feet.

Journeys end. We looked at each other, and we both knew it.

Megatron tore his gaze away from Optimus and stared at the horizon, taking stock. He was vaguely aware of Starscream gibbering in the background—"Praise the AllSpark! Master, you are alive!"

"Indeed," Megatron said, testing his voice. He was in total control of it again. Starscream tugged at him ineffectually.

"Together we will reunite all Decepticons and once again grind Cybertron under your mighty heel!"

Megatron shook him off. "No." He looked at the assembled bots, Autobot, Decepticon, at Optimus—and he remembered. . . .

Megatron became silent for a while. He waited, until he was sure that he had himself back, that he was not occupied. His thoughts were his own, but he did not feel the same. He understood then there was to be no return. He knew absolutely that what he had maintained with such certainty for so long was not true.

He wondered how it was that he had come here, through such a long road that had at all points seemed to be paved with truth, and ended up false. It did not seem just. It was not fair. But this thought made him smile, because he remembered that this was his first thought of any note, the one that had started him out, so long ago in the deep mine below Kaon City.

SECTOR D-16

It was not fair.

Why some bots came down here to the darkness and the heavy labor, why others did not. He said so to his friend—a companion without a name or even a designation: call him Nameless then, though this would not distinguish him from others in any way. They knew each other and worked the same seam, and that was enough.

Nameless paused from loading the ore cart and gave the matter some thought. "Maybe not. But it'd be one way or the other. I mean, y'have to be something, right? Miner's a thing, a job, always going to be busy."

The bot who would be Megatron, but who then was called only D-16, stuck his pick into the wall. He had brooded a long time on his fate and felt with every passing day a greater resentment. "But mining can be done by mindless machines. We are wasted here, far from anything of note. We could do so much more. We don't even have names. That is how little we are accounted for." And he twisted the pick and wrestled with the stone. The stone won. The pick broke. He tossed the shaft down and stared at the stub of it stuck in the rock face.

"Name's a difficult thing," Nameless said. "People'd assume things about you, with a name. Means you'd have to live up to it forever. This way you can just be what you are. Whatever that is."

"Everyone used to get names. Now they don't. Without names, here we are. Used. Discarded. Nothing and nobody." D-16 didn't know how the other bot could care so little. For a few days he tried to take Nameless's point of view, but it was no good. The injustice burned him like a fire from the inside. He began instead to think of a way to find a name and a reputation that would drag him up from this pointless occupation to something that suited his abilities. In his free hours out of the mine he went with countless others to the gaming tables and gladiator pits in Kaon city above.

At first he noticed only that the violent duels were entertainment for bots from as far afield as Iacon, beings

who definitely had names, and presumably important positions. None of them were in the ring. The fighters were from his own bit of the bottom strata, greedy or desperate, or simply vicious and frustrated. They slaughtered one another, and in their faces he saw glory, victory, despair . . . and he wondered how that pitiful moment could be enough, for anyone. But later he saw other potentials in it, and this made him cold and calculated in his determination to escape the chains offered him by the world he was born into; the twin shackles held so dear—Form and Function, a credo of the Quintessons who were gone, but whose pervasive presence was yet everywhere.

He saw in those victories the true oppression of the system; those bots in the ring had been robbed right from the Well, not only of status, but of imagination and dreams. They were pushed into a Quintesson-derived culture in which the summit of their aspiration was to destroy and to stand in a pit, looked down upon, and call it glory.

He entered himself into the contests that night, knowing that only a demonstration would be enough to move his fellows.

"Name?" the promoter asked him, poised with a stylus over a datapad.

For a moment he was blank. He thought back through the stories that the miners used to tell one another—old tales that made little sense about thirteen Primes and weapons of power, ages of heroes and great deeds in the past, the Cataclysm and the invasion. The name came to him suddenly and he felt its rightness. Megatronus; the Fallen. What could fall could surely rise again.

The promoter looked up, hesitating. "M-megatronus?"

It had the ring of such authority, such dark and righteous promises. D-16 felt it close around him, an armor of power, and for a moment remembered his companion from the seamface, and what he had said about names. Fair enough then. Let it be. . . .

Megatron recalled his early conversations with Orion Pax, then just an archivist who had read some pamphlets and been moved by the truth of things enough to get off his ivory-towered tailgate and visit the pits. There had been a moment when it seemed they would have joined forces and vanquished the insufferable order of things together. He could still feel the strange sense of balance that day had possessed, as if events might easily topple one way or another, but topple they would. And then that cipher, Alpha Trion, and the High Council lackeys of his had given the leadership to Orion Pax, and Pax had demonstrated that he was no revolutionary, but only the same old system in a newer, less moribund shape. Sentinel Prime and his crew of axle-greasers might be finished, but Optimus Prime was there to take his place.

Megatron felt again that righteous anger as he looked at Optimus Prime now: Optimus Prime, brother, tormentor, with—beyond belief—Unicron *in a bottle* in his hand.

Oh, that delicious righteous anger of being the victim, how purely it had burned, how good it had felt! He'd fallen in love with it right there in the mines, its surging energy a high he never tired of, and the contempt it brought with it a pleasing afterburn as it gratified his sense of injustice, stoking the flames. The apathy and indecision of the rest, so pathetic, so weak in comparison, had given his assertion of "Peace through Tyranny" the conviction of a true convert's faith. He was fit to lead because nobody else had even attempted to show a new way. And then he was thwarted, by Trion and by the startling revelation that some fragment of a myth was true.

The Matrix of Leadership had chosen Pax. Pax was born to lead, as Megatron was born to labor. Pax the vacillator, the conciliator, the mealymouthed diplomat.

And he, Megatron, had fallen for his own publicity meanwhile and become his own victim. Now, at the last, he had been Unicron's victim too, and learned the truth of his vanity. All that. All those ages of struggle, the Decepticon cause never brighter or truer, his own power relentlessly established time and again until he had felt so dominant that nothing could touch him—all a vanity.

He felt his ego try to stand up and reassert itself, but he had fallen out of love with it now; the romance was broken. It had led him to this state—Unicron's ex-puppet. He would not have more of that. He was capable of better. Whatever that was.

As he recalled this, only a moment on Cybertron passed. He found himself looking at Starscream's obsequious face.

"But Master, why?"

Megatron spoke aloud in answer to Starscream's question. "Because I now know the true meaning of oppression—and have thus lost my taste for inflicting it."

"You've clearly been traumatized; a good power down and a stroll around the smelting pit will put you back in touch with your inner warlord . . ." Starscream began, but Megatron rounded on him with a vicious snarl.

Above: Megatron rescinds his maxim of "peace through tyranny"

"*Utter another sound and I will end you.*" He turned back to Optimus and spoke more quietly, nodding once, slowly as he did so. "There is no peace through tyranny."

Optimus nodded in return, a faint smile on his face.

Megatron gave a last look to him, ignored the rest, and altformed, blazing up into the wide blue sky. After a moment, Starscream copied him, but in another direction.

The Autobots waited with bated breath, looking to Optimus to see if it was really true or not. "Gather everyone," he said. "There is something I wish to tell you."

Once they had done so, even Ultra Magnus and Ratchet too, he calmly explained what he had done in order to capture Unicron: put the AllSpark into the Matrix, into himself. . . .

"Are you telling us that you are now one with the AllSpark?" Ratchet asked slowly.

Smokescreen laughed nervously behind him. "Heh, that's usually what you say when . . ." He trailed off.

"But you're right here, healthy and fine," Ratchet objected weakly.

Optimus nodded, "But my quest has yet to be completed: to return the AllSpark to the Well. My own Spark has merged with it, and can no longer be separated from the others. And not to deliver the AllSpark would be to prevent Primus bestowing new life upon Cybertron. It is a sacrifice that I must make." And he smiled to himself for a moment as the others began to object and to beg for him not to go, that they'd find another way, there had to be an alternative. . . . But there was not.

"Even Megatron has demonstrated on this day that every sentient being possesses the ability for redemption," Optimus said gently over them, and they gave him their silence to listen. "I ask only this of you, fellow Autobots: keep fighting the noblest of fights and, above all, do not lament my passing"—he activated his jets, and they all stood back, their faces filled with dismay and wonder in equal measure as his was filled with joy at his homecoming—"For in my Spark, I know that this is not the end, but simply the next transformation."

Without a pause, he rose up and flew down into the Well. They all looked after him, and saw his chestplate open and the vivid glory of the Matrix and the AllSpark's lights come blazing out, greeting the dawn like a second sun, blinding them.

When they'd recovered, and it seemed that the light had fallen nearly forever, they saw the first new Spark rise—a mote of brilliance shooting out of the Well and dancing out across the land—and gasped and cheered, those who were able, and those who weren't gripped each other's hands and stared, then stood back as a massive shower of Sparks fountained up out of the Well, not hundreds or thousands but more and more, their colors blazing, their beauty vivid as they danced up and up into the brightening sky.

"Is this the end?" Arcee asked, finding herself holding Ratchet's hand. "Is the Great War actually *over*?"

They looked at each other.

"I'd say that was up to us now," Ratchet said.

"I vote for peace," Prowl said, looking up at the fountains of light.

"Me too!" said Bulkhead.

"Me three!" said Bumblebee, and began to broadcast the good news to anyone who was able to listen.

Opposite: Optimus Prime re-enters the Well

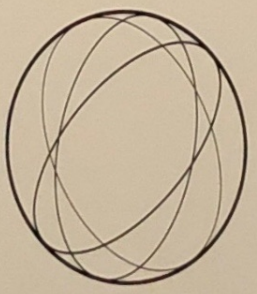
AFTERWORD

Thus ends the story of the Age of the Primes and of the origins of the Cybertronians, though not the whole story of course, for that is still being written in time and space on Earth, and all over the galaxy where the seeds and the sparks of life are growing.

I, Alpha Trion, one of the last Primes, now give this book into your hands, human friend, so that you shall know who your allies are, and your enemies also, how they are made, and where they have come from. Be sure that wherever and whenever you need our aid, the Autobots will respond to your call.

This is the Covenant of Primus, *as given to all Cybertronians by right, and to humans by the last wish of Optimus, the Thirteenth Prime, so let it be.*

TILL ALL ARE ONE.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JUSTINA ROBSON

Justina was born in Yorkshire, England, in 1968 and grew up watching the original TV series of the Transformers. She still vividly recalls the day her friend showed up one Christmas to show her the first Transformers toy she'd ever seen—it was a robot, and it was an airplane and the coolest thing any kid on the street had ever seen. Ever. Even if it was really hard to get in one shape or another without involving someone's dad.

The CV bit: After completing school, she dropped out of Art College, then studied philosophy and linguistics at York University. She sold her first novel in 1999. Since then she has won the 2000 Amazon UK Writers' Bursary Award. She has also been a student (1992) and a teacher (2002, 2006) at the Arvon Foundation in the UK, a center for the development and promotion of all kinds of creative writing. She was a student at Clarion West, the U.S. boot camp for science fiction and fantasy writers, in 1996. Her books have been variously shortlisted for the British Science Fiction Best Novel Award, the Arthur C. Clarke Award, the Philip K. Dick Award, and the John W. Campbell Award. An anthology of her short fiction, *Heliotrope*, was published in 2012. In 2004, Justina was a judge for the Arthur C. Clarke Award, on behalf of the Science Fiction Foundation. Her novels and stories range widely over science fiction and fantasy, often in combination and often featuring AIs and machines who aren't exactly what they seem.

She still lives in t'North of England with her partner and three children and a cat.

IMAGE CREDITS

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Conceptual art from Transformers: War for Cybertron and Transformers: Fall of Cybertron video game courtesy of Activision Publishing, Inc., and High Moon Studios. All art © 2009–2013 Hasbro.

beckerfmayer would like to extend special thanks to Andy Schmidt, Aaron Archer, Michael Kelly, and Richard Zambarano for their invaluable help in creating this book.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

KEN CHRISTIANSEN

Ken has been working as an illustrator and concept designer for more than fifteen years, starting as a video game concept artist at Nintendo of America (Ridge Racer 64, Pokemon Puzzle League), then moving to Los Angeles to work in games for the Walt Disney Company (Kingdom Hearts, Finding Nemo). In 2004, Ken started his own company, Bad Flip Productions, working for video game clients like Disney, Warner Bros., Universal, and Activision. After working with Activision on Transformers the Game, and the *Revenge of the Fallen* game, he began working freelance in media development for Hasbro, doing concept art for Transformers film, TV, book, game, and toy initiatives. That expanded into media development beyond the Transformers brand, including Star Wars, Spider-Man, and more.

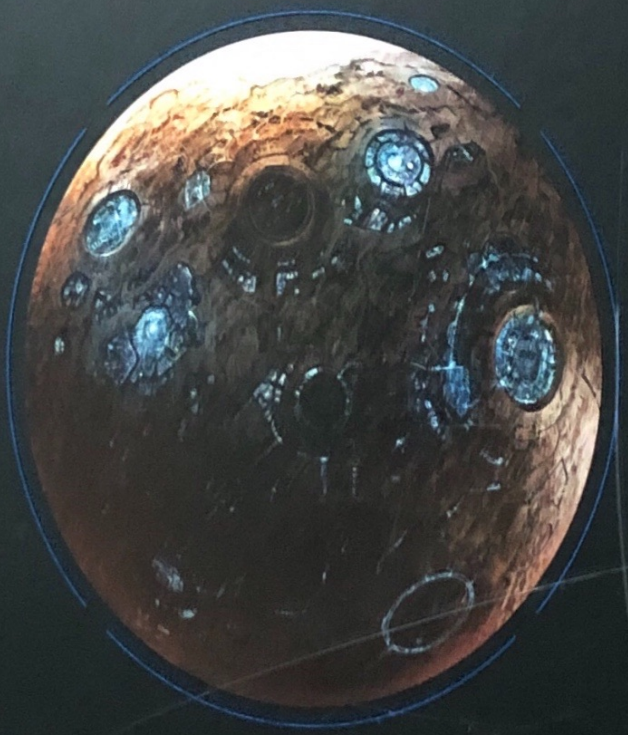
Ken's current work includes the cover runs on the Transformers Prime series (IDW), Star Wars Fighter Pods, and Ultimate Spider-Man Spider Pods. Along with other random bits and pieces, hanging off pegs in the toy aisles, bookshelves, and video game departments . . .

LIVIO RAMONDELLI

Livio Ramondelli is an illustrator and concept artist with credits including Transformers: Autocracy, Monstrosity, and Chaos for IDW Publishing. In addition, he served as a concept artist for DC Universe Online and provides art for Google and Hasbro. He received a master's degree from the Academy of Art University.

EMILIANO SANTALUCIA

Born and living in Palermo, Italy, Emiliano Santalucia is a concept designer and comic book artist who always loved toys. He started his comic career working on books based on licensed toy brands, including Transformers and G.I. Joe. In 2008, Emiliano began working as a freelance toy and concept designer, collaborating with Hasbro on many toy and movie projects including previsualizations for Transformers 3 and 4. He also illustrated the book *Transformers: The Ultimate Pop-Up Universe*, by Matthew Reinhart.

CASEY COLLER

Casey is a professional illustrator best known for his work on various Transformers comic books from IDW Publishing. He's done covers and/or interior art for various titles, including Transformers: Ironhide, All Hail Megatron, Robots in Disguise, Spotlights *Drift*, *Blurr*, and *Cliffjumper*, More Than Meets the Eye, Transformers Ongoing, and Heart of Darkness. He has also done artwork for Hasbro, the Transformers *Collector's Club Magazine*, and BotCon. Casey lives in Western Massachusetts with his wife, Grace, and daughter, Rose, as well as a cat, two guinea pigs, and four chickens.